

Title	The Corroded Surface: Portrait of the Sublime
Type	Thesis
URL	http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/9193/
Date	2016
Citation	Threapleton, James E. (2016) The Corroded Surface: Portrait of the Sublime. PhD thesis, University of the Arts London.
Creators	Threapleton, James E.

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The Corroded Surface: Portrait of the Sublime

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

March 2016

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ABSTRACT

Derived from the Latin *corrodere*, meaning to 'gnaw to pieces', corrosion as a transformative physical process is nature at its most sublime, engendering fear and power, producing the obscure and reducing form to the darkness 'beneath all beauty as promise of its ultimate annihilation' (Beckley, 2001: p. 72). The thesis considers corrosion as subtraction, erasure and negation in relation to the painting process. Through experimentation with the ruination of both content and painting's plastic, material properties the thesis reflects upon how the disruption or destruction of image and surface might relate to the un-representable.

Within the history of twentieth century art negation has been cited as the defining spirit of the Modernism (TJ Clark: 1986). Jean François Lyotard suggests that it is the sublime that has provoked this destructive, nihilistic tendency and given Modern and postmodern art its 'impetus and axioms' (Lyotard: 1979). As the 2010 Tate research project, *The Sublime Object* attests, the sublime is once again 'now'. Painting was conspicuous in its absence from the project, perhaps because as Simon Morley states 'most sublime artworks these days tend to be installations. It is certainly getting harder for painting, the traditional vessel for evoking visual sublimity, to elicit such effects' (2010, p. 74). This thesis will examine Morley's position by considering how the composition of the un-presentable may be alluded to through de-composition and corrosion in painting. An expressionist enquiry into the tension between figure and ground the thesis investigates a relationship between mark, surface and the sublime.¹

Notoriously difficult to capture, the sublime is intrinsically contradictory, making an effective, overarching theory on the subject all but impossible to sustain (Forsey: 2007). Highlighting some of the problems surrounding the theory of the sublime James Elkins, in his essay 'Against the Sublime' (2009), suggests that the term has been mistaken for a trans-historical category and that it has been used and abused to smuggle religious content into contemporary critical writing. Further more, he describes the post-Kantian postmodern sublime as so intricate and linguistically complex as to render it effectively redundant without substantial qualification. Elkins has called for a moratorium on the term sublime and a redress of language in favor of new, direct terms (2009). This project asks if painting can facilitate this redress and provide these terms.

¹ An enquiry that applies a necessarily heuristic approach to a project engaged with subjective, felt experience in painting characterized by and articulated through the primacy of gestural abstraction.

CONTENTS

Memories of the Hunt: Research Portfolio	i—xxxvi
<hr/>	
Introduction — <i>Things Lost in the Fire</i>	1
Prologue	2
Chaos Delineated: Theory, Terms and Territory	5
The Sublime is Dead: Long Live the Sublime	22
An Other Discourse: How Paint Moves	26
<hr/>	
Chapter I — <i>Newman's Now: Limit and Language</i>	35
How Now Became Negative: Trauma and the Sublime	41
Barnett Newman: Dissident Surrealist	44
Painting: Limit and Language	52
Discourse and Discord: The Sublime Beyond Now	62
<hr/>	
Chapter II — <i>His Dark Materials: Francis Bacon and the Abject Sublime</i>	76
Tawdry, Picayune and Brutish: A Report from the Surface of a Painting	77
Francis Bacon: Dissident Romantic	84
The Shock of the New: A History of Violence	86
Dust-to-Dust: Painting and the Abject Sublime	93
Painting the Scream: Obligation and Impossibility	102
<hr/>	
Chapter III — <i>The Smear: Portrait of the Sublime</i>	115
Saliva of the Gods: How Paint Moves	116
Towards Darkness: Painting in a Minor Key	120
Towards Abjection: Figuring the Smear	129
Towards the Haptic: Intuition and Impossibility	137

<u>Chapter IV — <i>Other Catastrophes</i></u>	<u>150</u>
Towards the Haptic II: The Figure Under Abstraction	
Painting Painting: Towards the ‘Unsymbolized Imaginary’	159
Figuring Abstraction: The Smear as Portrait of the Self	184
Lost in Translation: Forms of Discourse	194
Ghosts in the Machine: Painting Absence	206
 <u>Conclusion — <i>Memories of the Hunt: Speculation and Reflection</i></u>	 <u>220</u>
<i>Discourse of the Sublime</i> : Reflections on Practice	224
<i>Discourse on the Sublime</i> : Speculations on Theory	227
 <u>Bibliography</u>	 <u>232</u>

A note on thesis structure:

Central to this research is a perceived tension between forms of discourse and language. This is reflected in the thesis structure. Experimentation with a negative, abject language of painting is the prism through which a new theoretical perspective on the sublime and its discourse is viewed. Material language determines a re-reading of a historical narrative. Studio practice is the compass with which the library is navigated. Painting leads the investigation. For this reason a portfolio of studio research is presented first as foreground to the theoretical inquiry.

The structure of the written document, necessarily, presents chapters that establish the theoretical and critical perspective before those which deal with studio research. Consequently, it will be noted that there is a deliberate shift in tone and timbre between chapters that consider theory and those that look at painting as material language.

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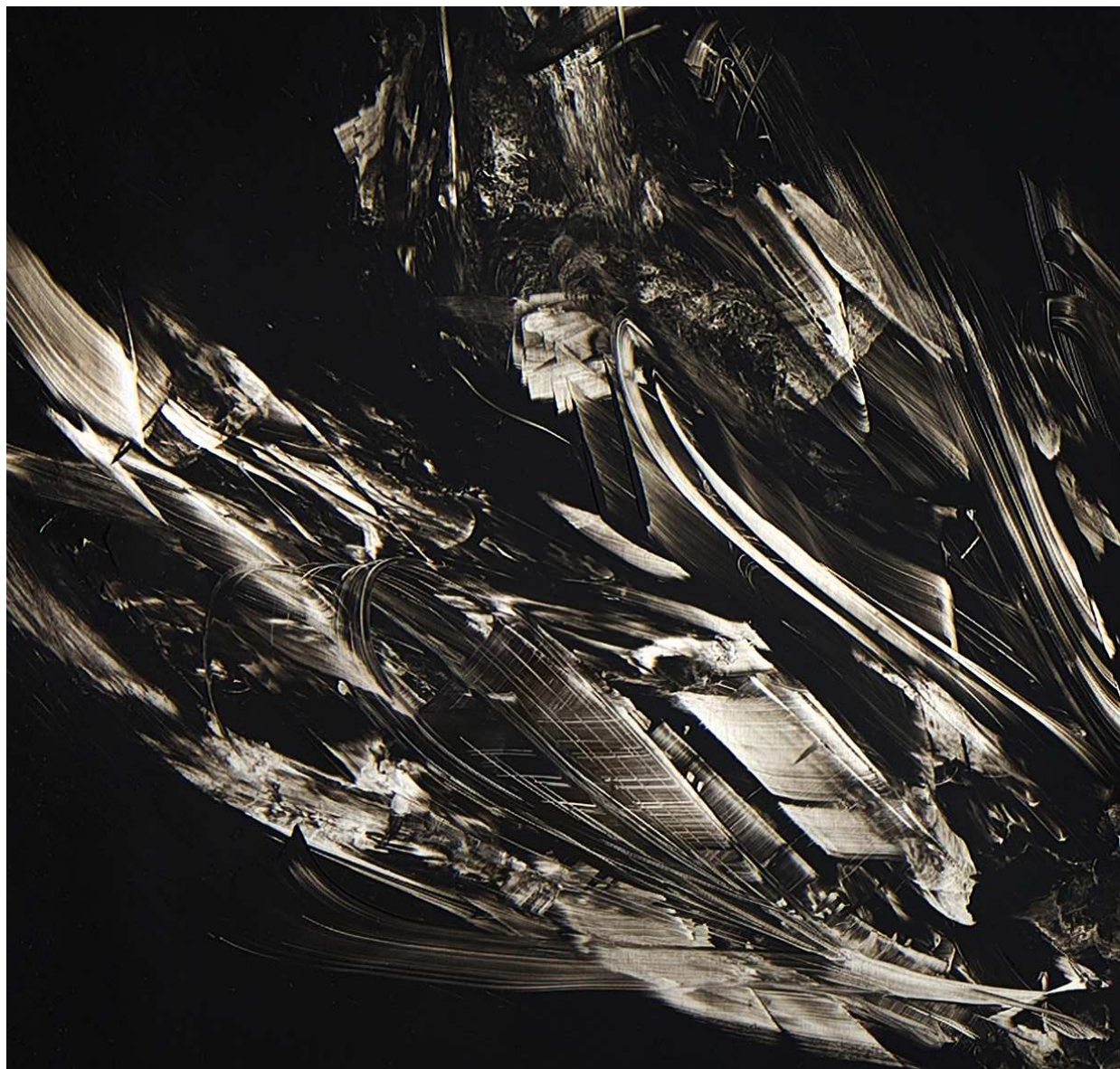
The Whiteness of the Whale, 2015
(Oil on stainless steel, 100 x 100 cm)



Symptom XIV, 2015
(Oil on aluminium, 30 x 30 cm)



Nocturne II, 2014
(Oil on stainless steel, 100 x 100 cm)



Nocturne II, 2014—detail



Symptom VIII, 2014
(Oil on stainless steel, 100 x 100 cm)



Painting III, 2014
(Oil on aluminium, 30 x 30 cm)



Painting IV, 2014
(Oil on aluminium, 30 x 30 cm)



Painting IX, 2015
(Oil on aluminium, 30 x 30 cm)



Painting V, 2015
(Oil on aluminium, 30 x 30 cm)



Symptom XX, 2014
(Oil on aluminium, 30 x 30 cm)



Symptom XVII, 2015
(Oil on aluminium, 30 x 30 cm)



Symptom II, 2014
(Oil on aluminium, 30 x 30 cm)



Symptom IX, 2014
(Oil on aluminium, 30 x 30 cm)



Symptom X, 2014
(Oil on stainless steel, 100 x 100 cm)



Symptom X — detail



Nocturne IV, 2013
(Oil on stainless steel, 100 x 100 cm)



Untitled XI, 2013
(Oil on stainless Steel)



Untitled V, 2013
(Oil on stainless steel, 40 x 40 cm)



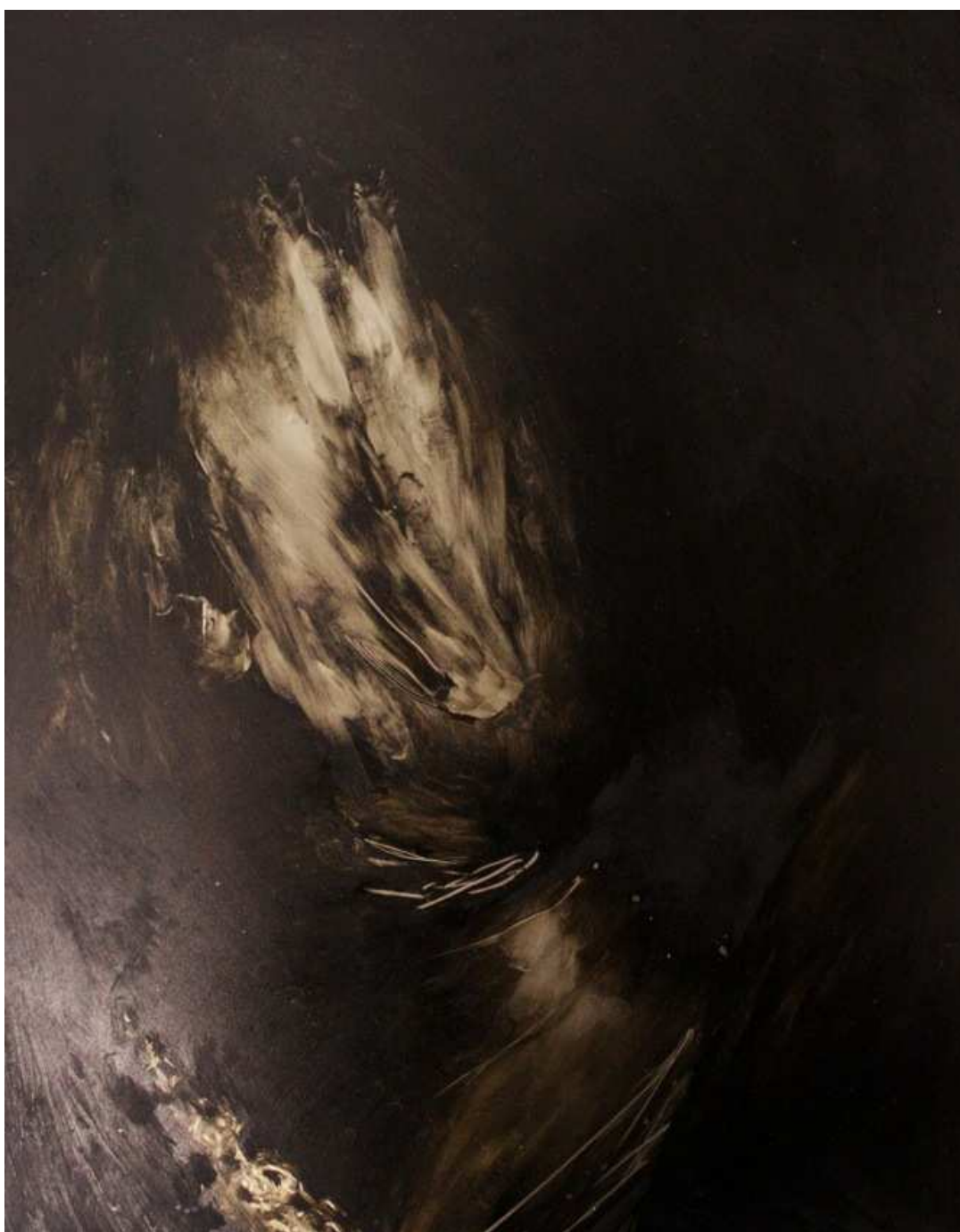
Symptom IV, 2013
(Oil on stainless steel, 40 x 40 cm)



Juju, 2013,
(Oil on stainless steel, 50 x 50 cm)



Juju—detail



Untitled III, 2013
(Oil on stainless steel, 30 x 40 cm)



Untitled, 2012,
(Oil on steel, 50 x 50 cm)



Study V, 2012
(Oil on steel, 40 x 35 cm)

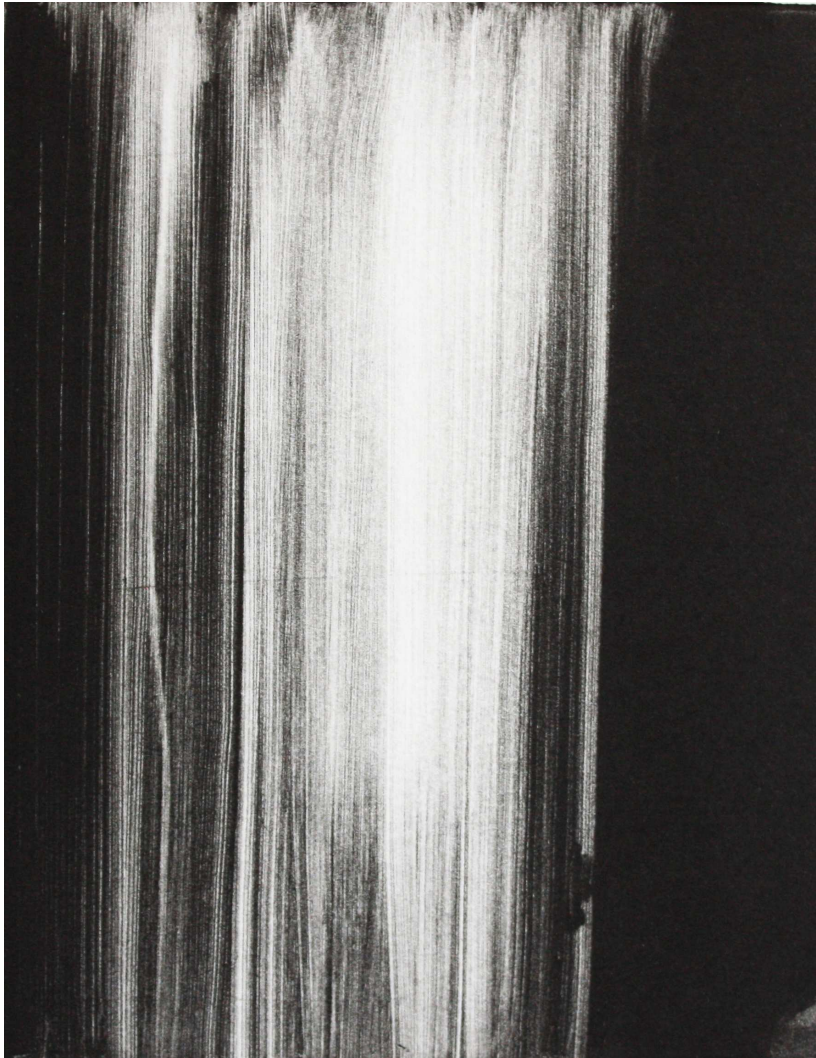


Study II, 2011
(Oil on steel, 12 x 16 cm)

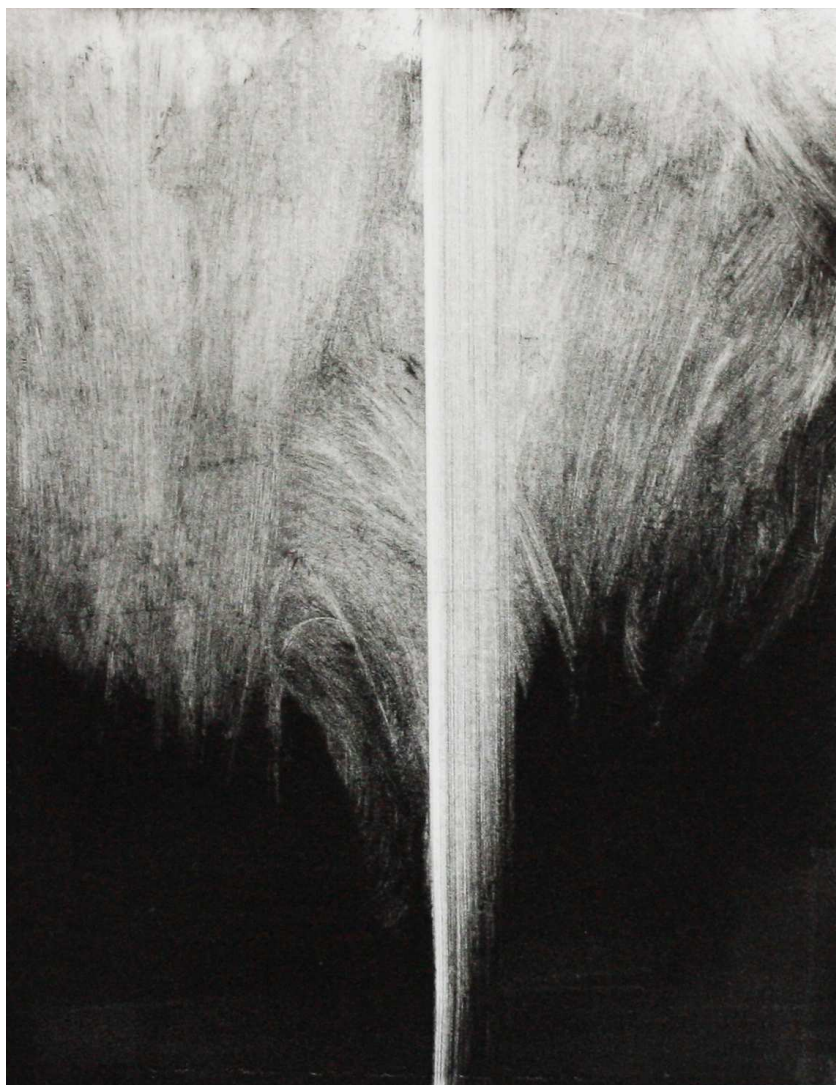
WORKS ON PAPER



Monoprint suite, 2012-15
(All works oil on 200/300gm Somerset paper,
Image size 11 x 14 cm on 60 x 70 cm)



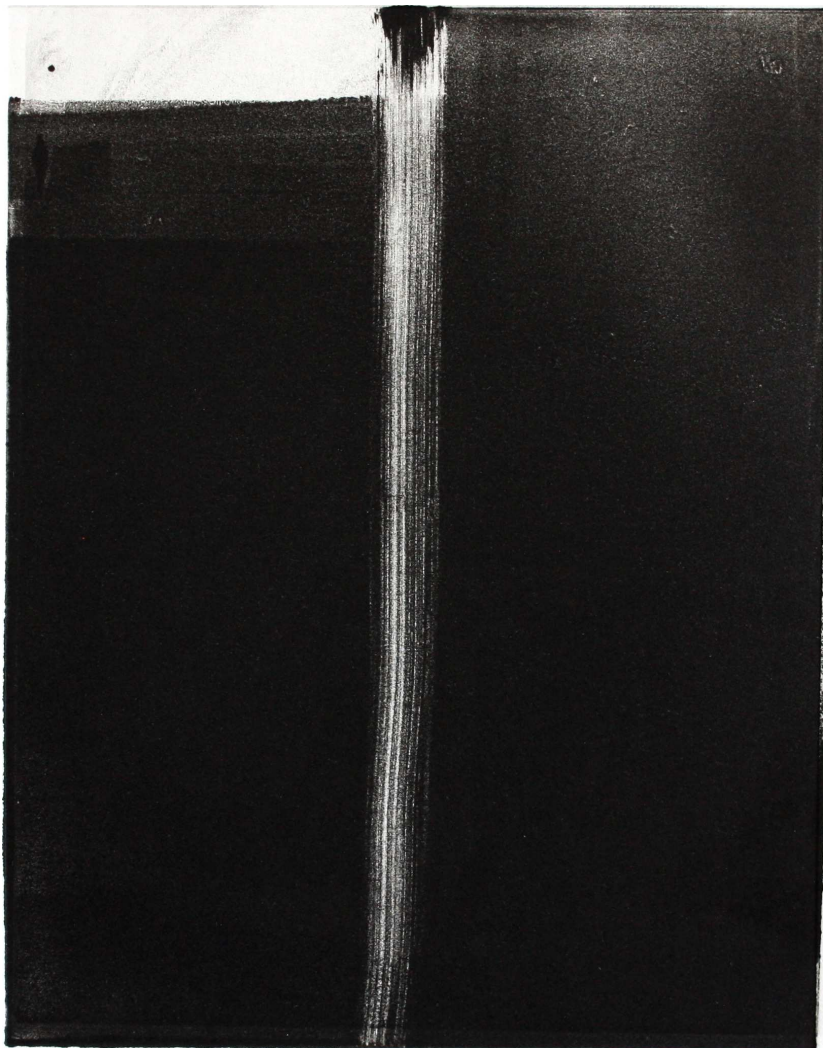
Movement XX, XXI



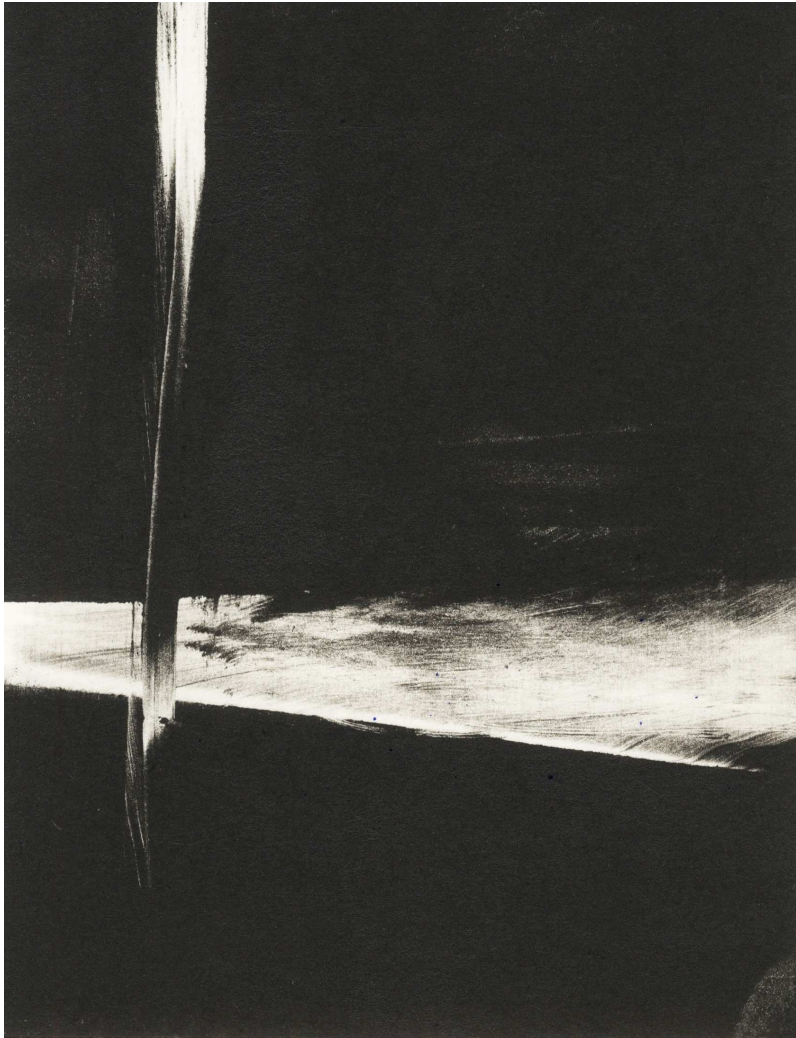
Movement II, IV



Movement IX, XIII



Movement XVI, XVII



Movement III, VIII



Negotiation VIII, X



Negotiation I, III



Negotiation V, VII



Negotiation VI, VII



Movement V, XII

INTRODUCTION

Entering that gabled-ended Spouter Inn, you found yourself in a wide, low, straggling entry with old-fashioned wainscots, reminding one of the bulwarks of some condemned old craft. On one side hung a very large oil painting so thoroughly besmoked, and every way defaced, that in the unequal crosslights by which you viewed it, it was only by diligent study and a series of systematic visits to it, and careful inquiry of the neighbors, that you could any way arrive at an understanding of its purpose. Such unaccountable masses of shades and shadows, that at first you almost thought some ambitious young artist, in the time of the New England hags, had endeavored to delineate chaos bewitched. But by dint of much and earnest contemplation, and oft repeated ponderings, and especially by throwing open the little window towards the back of the entry, you at last come to the conclusion that such an idea, however wild, might not be altogether unwarranted.

[...] A boggy, soggy, squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted. Yet there was a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that fairly froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what that marvelous painting meant.

Henry Melville, *Moby-Dick or, The Whale*¹

Published in 1851, Melville's description of his narrator Ishmael's encounter with this obscure, unsettling painting — a painting that eventually reveals itself as a depiction of terror and the 'leviathan' — is noteworthy as an account of an 'unimaginable sublimity' manifest in painting of a particular materiality. Widely regarded in terms of the grand Romantic literary tradition, Melville's account of the painting at the whaling inn presents that which exceeds cognition and ultimately language itself not in the context of the elevation or elation historically associated with the shock and awe of theologically charged nature, but instead in terms prescient of a very modern sense of the sublime, where the inconceivable is bound not to the towering mountain range or infinite heavens but rather to a secularized notion of spirit, to the base, the unrepresentable, to the inexpressible — to presentation itself. Representation gives way to abstraction, content to form, figure to ground. Sublime experience is not contained by readable, associative signs, symbols or

narrative motifs — by description or *literature* — rather the sublime is operative, it is presence. It is the direct, physical immediacy of the painting itself. Melville invokes a sublimity that turns on the negative, on ‘shades’, ‘shadows’ and on ‘chaos’. The abyss or the infinite void is embodied in the ‘half-attained’. Melville grasps the sublime against the grain, against the prevailing traits of affirmation and progress as modeled by Edmund Burke in his influential 1757 treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Though demonstrably and directly indebted to Burke’s categorization of the concept, Melville invokes, via the medium of painting, an essentially pessimistic sublime where nature is indifferent, arbitrary, base and malign.² It offers no redemption or divine reassurance. The luminous Romantic landscape of William Wordsworth and Casper David Friedrich gives way to darkness — to a defiled and desecrated material surface — *besmoked, defaced, boggy, squitchy*. Rather than that of Edmund Burke, such language is perhaps more redolent of the anti-hierarchical, anti-institutional writing of the twentieth century dissident surrealist George Bataille. It is an abject sublime that holds Ishmael in peculiar thrall.

Prologue

It is summer 2010, Camberwell College of Art. The day before the MA Fine Art final show is due to be installed. The studios, normally flooded with natural light from the floor-to-ceiling cast iron windows and gallery-white — but for the stains and viscera of a year’s worth of art student trial and error — are instead silent, dim and devastated. The walls are blackened with soot and dust that water runs through, forming a kind of tar that now streams ceiling-to-floor in places. The stench of smoke thickens the air turning it acrid. Every surface has been charred and chewed. The windows are shattered and the iron frames have buckled. Ceiling plaster, broken glass and the remains of studio furniture have formed a landscape of demolition. Fine art materials have been reduced to indefinable matter. Cellulose paper and sunlight have been the

catalyst for auto-combustion that has caused a fire to all but entirely destroy the facility.

Amongst the wreckage of my workspace I am confronted by the remains of the body of painting I have developed over the course of my study. The fire has been fierce but inconsistent. Whilst nothing has entirely escaped its reach or the insidious effects of smoke and water, some work has fared better than others. My largest painting (180 x 120cm, oil on wood panel), yet to be titled, is still mounted to the wall. Nevertheless, the support has been badly disfigured and the original representational image all but entirely de-figured. Pictorial content has been reduced to such a degree that it is now not unlike the unfathomable abject abstraction that Melville's narrator contemplates at The Spouter Inn. Like Ishmael, I too am fairly frozen to an unrecognizable, if not now incomprehensible painting. My initial emotionally charged response to a work that had taken a substantial amount of time to complete, now so drastically distorted, is slowly replaced by a kind of hypnotic apprehension in the face of that which has transgressed my limits as a painter. 'Squitchy' and 'besmoked', my ambitions towards figuration have been 'in every way defaced'. This process of de-composition, arbitrary and ambivalent, has left little but a bottomless black monochrome — a particular empty, far from *nothing*.

Where previously as a figurative painter my work courted representational image to allude to or infer an oblique conception of narrative, the physicality of the corrupted surface now insists upon the primacy of material experience alone. Such experience feels direct and unmediated, corporeal rather than cognitive. There is a revelatory force in the *here-ness*, in the *now-ness* of the confrontation with the plastic reality of the defaced painting before me. The spirit invoked from such revelation has little to do with the divine, rather it equates to the spirit of painting — painting as feeling — spirit derived less from rapture and more from rupture, less from God, more from the unknown which George Bataille suggests 'overturns everything within us like a violent wind'.³ A certain self-awareness is triggered in this temporal irruption where past and future splinter. It is a self-awareness that conflates the position of

author, whose aims and objectives have been distorted and transgressed by a process of degradation, with that of the spectator, whose reception of the work is now necessarily subjective. Like a Van Der Graaf generator, a kind of metaphysical static crackles from the material surface, holding opposing states at tension, oscillating between limit and that which is beyond, between past and future — between the anxiety that comes from what's been lost and the dizzying sensation of delight at possibility, at a fleeting glimpse of new means and methods, of a language in painting defined by negation and base materiality. It is a sublime of the formless that holds me rigid to the remnants of my fire-damaged painting.

Oil paint has separated from binders, medium from varnish, forming passages where a resin — a kind of 'a nameless yeast', to employ Melville's phrase — coagulates between pocked and mottled pigment. Elsewhere the surface has bubbled and cracked, leaving a brittle flaking, sooty crust. Color has been polluted leaving 'unaccountable shades and shadows' in ash grey and char-black. Other areas, where flames have been most direct are singed and scorched. Here wood, warped and bowing, is fully exposed beneath the destabilized sediment of paint layers and gesso primer. A previously meticulous and unified surface, with depth and form derived from technique and control, has been reduced to the indefinite by accident, chance and by absence. Figuration moves away from the literal and the literary towards an alternative conception — towards alterity, determined not by representation but by presentation or the impossibility of it. Here the operative methods are found to be corruption and decay. These destructive forces, these forces of privation subsequently proved the catalyst for a tectonic shift in my approach to painting and the figure/ground relationship.

This re-orientation within my practice was not merely a turning out of the figurative in favor of pure abstraction. Rather it signaled a re-evaluation of figuration in abstract terms, whereby the exteriority of representation gives way to the interiority of expression. As such it is a shift from construction of image to the image of de-construction, from control to catastrophe, the optic to the haptic, from the intuitive to the subjective. Subsequently my concerns

have developed from how paint reads to how paint speaks or moves, both as plastic material but also in terms of affect. Simply put, I am interested with painting as a felt experience. In this sense the privileged position previously occupied by composition, association and narrative is superseded by a downward facing notion of materiality. As both critical, self-reflexive strategy and studio method, negation presented the means to integrate abstraction into coherent form. Through gesture and the material qualities of paint my practice has gravitated towards a relationship between expression and the un-presentable. Fundamentally irreconcilable, the ground between concept and its articulation is unstable; it is the decaying, brittle veneer of a scorched oil painting, splintered, sticky and cracked. The ambiguous and contested territory between subject and object is the corroded surface.

Chaos Delineated: Theory, Terms and Territory

Derived from the Latin *corrodere*, meaning to ‘gnaw to pieces’, corrosion as a transformative physical process engenders fear and power, producing the obscure and reducing form to the darkness ‘beneath all beauty as promise of its ultimate annihilation’.⁴ It is nature at its most sublime — a nature characterized by the arbitrary and ambivalent and a sense of the ineffable found in the base and the abject. Corrosion embodies the orientation towards the negative that has arguably determined the conception of the modern and postmodern sublime. It serves as a broad term to encompass a painting practice increasingly driven by strategies of reduction, erasure and destruction. For the purposes of a research project that examines the figure/ground relationship in relation to the un-presentable, corrosion is employed poetically — as conceptual scaffold — and practically as studio strategy, relating to painting process and the figure. Through experimentation with the ruination of both content and painting’s plastic, material properties the study reflects upon how tactics of negation, the disruption or destruction of (figurative) image and/or surface might articulate a contemporary sense of the sublime after the exhaustion of traditional forms of language.

Within the history of twentieth century art painters have courted negation variously as critical tactic, analytical process and strategy of abstraction. Clement Greenberg's pervasive self-reflective, cannibalistic essentialism prescribed the destruction of the immediate past in search of new forms of expression that bore comparison to the established canon of masterworks. Art's will to eat itself, prominent particularly in late modernist painting — its 'desire to destroy beauty', as Barnett Newman declared in his now famous text 'The Sublime is Now', published in the sublime issue of *The Tiger's Eye Magazine*, 1948 — can be seen to have arisen from the collapse of traditions of academic representational painting and the subsequent need to confront the un-presentable. Stripped of the cozy surety offered by the pursuit of the representational, painting over the course of the first half of the twentieth century turned inwards on itself, from prosaic objective visuality towards 'totality' — towards subjectivity, governed by the experience of material and process. Painting developed under the sign of absolutism particular to material and medium, resulting in vehement self-criticality — in acts of negation that T. J. Clark cites as the defining spirit of the modernism.⁵ In his appraisal of Greenberg's theory of art Clark comments that 'Modernism would have its medium be *absence* of some sort — absence of finish or coherence, indeterminacy, a ground which is called on to swallow up distinctions'.⁶

Though Clark himself resists offering examples of what might be described as a culture of privation, much mid-century art can be seen through the prism of negation. At the same time that Greenberg is writing his seminal text 'Avant Garde and Kitsch', in 1949, Samuel Beckett purges himself of James Joyce's influence by writing *Waiting for Godot* in Paris. Beckett declares, 'I realized that my own way was in impoverishment, in a lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding'.⁷ Performed for the first time in 1953 — a year defined by erasure on both sides of the Atlantic — *Waiting For Godot* is a work of irreducible nothingness, it is an emptying out the theatrical from theater. Illusion is extinguished by existential abstraction leaving the equivalent of the theatrical monochrome. Also published in 1953 is *Writing Degree Zero* by Roland Barthes — likewise an essentialist manifesto for literature where language is stripped of style and manner in favor of the binary

— in the economy found in the relationship between negative and positive. 1953 also witnessed Robert Rauschenberg exhibit his *White Paintings* at Betty Parsons' Stable Gallery in New York. In a letter to Parsons Rauschenberg described them as

Dealing with the suspense, excitement and body of an organic silence, the restriction and freedom of absence, the plastic fullness of nothing, the point a circle begins and ends. They are a natural response to the current pressures of the faithless and a promoter of intuitional optimism. It is completely irrelevant that I am making them — Today is their creator.⁸

Though the negative language of the monochrome was by 1953 already established through precedents set variously by Kazimir Malevich (*Black Square*, 1915), Barnett Newman (*Abraham*, 1949) and Ad Reinhardt, Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* caused critical consternation and division. Branden Joseph comments that for both Greenberg and *Art Digest* writer, Hubert Crehan, the

White Paintings [...] crossed the razor-thin dividing line between a determinate negation (upon which the dialectic of formalist modernism's perpetual self-critique was founded) and an indeterminate or abstract form of negation that marked a revival of earlier avant-garde shock.⁹

Clement Greenberg too apparently felt that the *White Paintings* fell on the wrong side of the right kind of negation, seeming rehearsed and without the 'feeling' of material truth. Ambivalent about them, he waited until 1967 to describe them as 'familiar looking and even slick', reiterating his view that though a tacked up bare canvas might qualify as a picture it is not 'necessarily' a good one.

Rauschenberg's *White Paintings* erased the figure/ground distinction entirely, leaving behind a silence that, rehearsed or otherwise, would inspire John Cage — a colleague of Josef Albers at Black Mountain College — to his own seminal act of negation, the sonic monochrome '4.33' in 1953. The same year

would also eventually witness Rauschenberg's notorious act of iconoclasm, *The Erased de Kooning Drawing*. Having convinced an understanding, but nevertheless disapproving, Willem de Kooning to give up a work to the idea, Rauschenberg spent close to a month fastidiously removing all trace of the abstract expressionist's valuable figurative drawing. No easy task thanks to de Kooning's choice of a formally complex and materially obstinate work.

As with his experiments with the monochrome Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* oscillates between a kind of material sincerity and conceptual gesture, between repudiation and affirmation, between authentic process and shock tactic. Rauschenberg himself described his act of erasure as poetry — a particular kind of language, intrinsically abstract and counter to narrative, to history's linear prose. *The Erased de Kooning Drawing* functions on the one hand as image of negation, as socio-cultural critique, and on the other as the negation of image, as process of abstraction that orientated subject from image to surface, material and medium. In the former sense erasure serves as a mechanism of revision, a means of purging history — of silencing a rarely compliant past. 1953 was very much in the shadow of a recent past defined by purges, from the Soviet show trials of the 30s, to the Nazi eradication of degenerative culture in the 40s, to the post war epuration campaign against artists, writers and politicians that had collaborated with Germany during the occupation of Paris. *The Erased de Kooning Drawing* might also be viewed through the lens of the second red scare that gripped America around 1953. The rise of communism had provoked the notorious witch-hunts orchestrated by the conservative US senator Joseph McCarthy that laid waste to numerous careers throughout the political, social and cultural spheres. This, combined with the nuclear paranoia that had taken hold globally after the Soviet Union exploded their first hydrogen bomb in August 1953, contributes to the sense that Rauschenberg's act of negation indirectly reflects an age of anxiety.

Artistically Rauschenberg's performative, vandalistic negation of image has been received as the purging of Abstract Expressionism's domineering presence — an Oedipal act of violence against the father. As Vincent Katz

argues, Rauschenberg himself is more equivocal, stating in interview that 'I erased the de Kooning not out of any negative response'.¹⁰ It was not de Kooning that Rauschenberg's iconoclasm aimed at but rather 'given ways of working' — language that had become familiar, comfortable and, therefore, untrustworthy and unreliable.¹¹ While much can be made of Rauschenberg's erasure critically and conceptually it remains in simple terms a material response to the question of subject — a matter of artistic methodology. It is a process of renewal, a restatement of potential through negation. Erasure is a clearing out. As Gilles Deleuze points out such a process of negation is universal and unavoidable, he writes 'it would be a mistake to think that the painter works on a white and virgin surface. The entire surface is already invested with all kinds of clichés which the painter will have to break with'.¹² Deleuze continues

They are all present in the canvas as so many images, actual or virtual, so that the painter does not have to cover a blank surface, but rather would have to empty it out, clear it, clean it. He does not paint in order to reproduce on the canvas an object functioning as a model; he paints on images that are already there, in order to produce a canvas whose functioning will reverse the relations between model and copy.¹³

Rauschenberg produces a model that obliterates de Kooning's copy. The figure, which, no matter how abstracted in de Kooning's hands remains loaded with history and the sediment of association, is reduced by Rauschenberg to unending, infinite nothing. *The Erased de Kooning Drawing* is a return to square one; its states silently *do not pass go*. 'Go' being the point of optimum torment for the artist — where future is set in opposition with the past, where limitless potential conflicts with the constraints of language, where the inability to express conflicts with the obligation to do so. Meaning and value are defined by failure and emptiness, where action is embodied by paralysis and unending anticipation. Erasure testifies to failure, to the inadequacy of existing forms of language, to the impossibility of presentation and the futility of expression.

The artist's relationship to failure is central to my practice as a painter, both in terms of subject matter and process of production. It contributes to a sense of negation that Beckett characterized as impoverishment in art — where language, be it visual, written or spoken, re-orientates towards negative space, silence, the gaps between words, phrases and images — towards what Beckett termed a 'literature of the unword'.¹⁴ He writes

As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another into it, until what lurks behind it — be it something or nothing — begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today.¹⁵

The limit of language is fundamental to his claim that 'there is nothing to express', that the principal task of the artist is to confront this obligation, to express nothing as the lack that reveals threshold and, therefore, the possibility of its transcendence. In this sense, for the painter, failure it is not terminal, merely grounds for divorce. Beckett comments that 'The history of painting, here we go again, is the history of its attempts to escape from this sense of failure, by means of more authentic, more ample, less exclusive relations between representer and representee'.¹⁶ In their essay 'Samuel Beckett: Inhibited Reading', Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit state that

Impotence, incompetence, and failure, as well as the lack of subject material, do not lead to the end of art; they are instead the necessary conditions for what Beckett describes as a break with the compromises of art in the past. They are in other words formulas for starting again, not apocalyptic announcements of the end of art. What we must therefore try to understand is how something that Beckett calls the failure to express can renew what we can, after all, only designate as artistic expression.¹⁷

Like Bataille's conception of the formless, Beckett's ideal of failure strips meaning, association and narrative from language and reduces it to function. A 'Literature of the unword' ruptures language from its past. Such inversions of hierarchies return us to T. J. Clark, who contends that the associated desire for self-definition comes at the expense of broader socio/cultural value. He

argues that such tactics of reduction in the end prove counter productive, restricting meaning to practice itself. He states

The practice in question is extraordinary and desperate: it presents itself as a work of interminable and absolute decomposition, a work which is always pushing “medium” to its limits — to its ending — to the point where it breaks or evaporates or turns back into mere unworked material. That is the form in which medium is retrieved or reinvented: the fact of Art, in modernism *is* the fact of negation [...] On the other side of negation is always emptiness: that is the message which modernism never tires of repeating and a territory into which it regularly strays. We have an art in which ambiguity becomes infinite, which is on the verge of proposing — or does propose — an Other which is comfortably ineffable, a vacuity, a vagueness, a mere mysticism of sight.¹⁸

For Clark negation, under Greenberg’s rubric, is a road that ‘leads back and back to the black square’ — the inevitable, unavoidable and formally predictable essentialist vanishing point where values and meaning fold in on themselves.¹⁹ However, by discounting the subjectivity engendered by negation, by devaluing an encounter with medium at its limits, both in terms of material and idiom, Clark presents this particular ‘emptiness’ as a kind of all-devouring tokenistic avant-gardism. The black square may well be a formal absolute zero, but as its persistence within the history of twentieth century painting has demonstrated it is far from being an end point absolutely. It is also the point at which past and future collapse into a singularity, into what Michael Fried refers to in his rebuttal of Clark’s argument as ‘presentness’, a kind of phenomenology of *Now* where the terms of a contemporary painting sustain comparison with the established canon of the past.²⁰

For mid-century painters this presentness equates to an experiential encounter with material fact. Rather than a slash-and-burn rejection of the medium’s lineage, negation is a proposition on the viability or vitality of the medium and its history — a means of taking painting’s pulse by responding to work of the past, recent or otherwise, ‘whose quality is beyond question’.²¹ For Fried the glass is half-full. He insists that whilst ‘moments of negation’

may be traceable in the development of modernism they are readable only in 'relation to a more encompassing and fundamental set of positive values, conventions, sources of conviction'.²² Negation, as both tactic and technique, serves as catalyst for progression, for reaching beyond the limits of what Fried terms the 'cognitive enterprise of modernist painting'; the black square functions as a reboot button for painting. As Alfred Barr, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art, comments 'Every generation must paint its own black square'. Drawing on his own previous paper 'Art and Objecthood', Fried comments that

The essence of painting is not something irreducible. Rather, the task of the modernist painter is to discover those conventions which, at a given moment, alone are capable of establishing his work's identity as painting.²³

Such conventions, such new forms of language defined by processes of reduction during the mid-century period cannot be categorized as critique alone. They also allude to the relationship between the work and the beholder, or to use Beckett's terms between 'representer' and 'representee'. Insisting that such policies of reduction downgrade practice to 'indeterminate negation' — to nothing more than a mode of shock and novelty — Clark short-circuits the material encounter, by-passing the potentiality of direct experience and feeling, where vacuity, vagueness and the infinite conspire to a sense of the ineffable that is far from comfortable. To dismiss alterity derived from the negative or the impoverished as 'mere mysticism of sight' is to undervalue the contribution of visual language to a 'literature of the unword', to an evolving discourse that continues in contemporary terms to chart a downward trajectory for the ineffable, for an Other orientated towards the base, the partial and the contingent.

Negative values have continued to shape certain developments in contemporary painting. In 2009 the American writer Raphael Rubinstein, in his *Art in America* essay 'Provisional Painting', marked the re-emergence of concerns with limit, failure and futility in painting through tendencies towards the self-cancelling, abandoned and unfinished. He comments that 'A growing

number of younger artists (and a few who have been showing for longer) are entertaining the idea of impossibility in painting. This has led them to reject a sense of finish in their work, or to rely on acts of negation'.²⁴ Rubinstein correlates these destructive, negative tendencies with the futility of expression, with the impossibility of painting in the face of an overwhelming history and the excesses of an infinite, pluralist postmodern cultural landscape. Rather than with divine spirit, transcendence, as such, is here orientated to an experience of the broken spirit — to painting of the barely there, the boggy, the squitchy, the unfinished, half attained, the failed — as Rubinstein would have it, the *provisional*. Perversely, painting is all the more optimistic for the material pessimism that comes from the torture of a fleeting glimpse of that which exceeds the limits of language and expression. As Rubinstein points out

Provisional painting is not about making last paintings, nor is it about the deconstruction of painting. It's the finished product disguised as a preliminary stage, or a body double standing in for a star/masterpiece whose value would put a stop to artistic risk.²⁵

Rubinstein puts forward a roster of current painters that produce work through self-cancelling, consciously downward facing methods. Erasure, subtraction, material reduction and defacement are the principal means of production for artists like Christopher Wool, Albert Oehlen, Jacqueline Humphries and Charlene Von Heyl; painters for whom the lure of the unfinished and its gestural language best serves the practice of negation. In an article from 2011 Jordan Kantor discusses Oehlen's recent *Fingermalerei* series of paintings in which the artist jettisons the brush in favor of the fingers.²⁶ Kantor raises the question of whether such elemental, primitive mark making can be taken as sincere in a contemporary period defined by citation. Can such a language still effectively carry 'auratic presence', or are such tactics 'inescapably haunted by their previous artistic uses'?²⁷ Citing works like Oehlen's 2011 painting *FM 48* (Figure.1), a work in which finger-painted marks have taken center stage from a previous reliance on text and other elements of



Figure. 1 Albert Oehlen, *FM 48*, 2011
(Oil on board, 137 x 205 cm)

courtesy of artist
and Gagosian Gallery, New York

appropriated image ephemera, Kantor suggests that despite history's overbearing antecedents there remains potential for the language of gesture in relation to unmediated experience. Oehlen's *Fingermalerei*, Kantor states, testify to an authentic 'elemental will to communicate'. He continues

By setting a mood, by evoking a feeling, or by implicating the viewer's body in imagining the gestures that made those marks. Indeed this series might help us reframe the essential question of communication and expression that animates all of Oehlen's paintings: At a time when languages and codes seem to define all areas of experience and understanding, "Fingermalerei" points to the promise of a space beyond linguistic or informatic representation'.²⁸

Painting becomes articulate under the conditions of its own repression — figuration, through the sublimation of abstraction. *FM 48* is one of Oehlen's more sparse paintings from his *Fingermalerei* cycle. The compositional space, such as it is, is dominated by de-composition — by erasive wipes dragged vertically down through the body or syntax of energetically delivered gestural smears and fingermarks. Such erasure sets the painting at tension, on the one hand being a decisive, declarative act that re-instates or reclaims the potential of the exposed white ground of the primed canvas, while on the other being an expletive of failure, an invective of doubt that leaves in its wake a void that returns the crushing proposition, 'and what now?' — a question that occupied painters of the postwar period and particularly the Abstract Expressionists, whose search for form and content in the wake Auschwitz and cubism prompted the renewal of visual language under the auspices of negation.

It is a vocabulary that rejects or at least provides a counter point to the ubiquity and spectacle of the digital image, de-sensitized and diluted through an unending cycle of re-appropriation and re-production, in favor of the prototype — particular, unique, something wholly Other — with an autonomy

and material truth. That current 'provisional' trends in painting have their roots in the language of negation that defined modernism is made apparent in Oehlen's *Fingermalerei* series, through which he declares an affiliation, after the fact, with Willem de Kooning. Oehlen comments that 'I developed my paintings without looking at de Kooning and now I see that de Kooning did all the things that I do. I'm not afraid to tell anyone who wants to hear it. He is the most interesting artist at the moment'. He continues

It was a very deliberate decision of mine to make something that recalls the art of that time. So it's the technique, this pathetic idea of the painting with the hands, the sensibility, feeling of the paint, feeling the canvas...That's what I wanted to do after seeing a show of Action Painting [...] But, coincidentally, on that set-up, I came across de Kooning again. Because he did more than what you see at first glance [...] It looks like it's just a one-to-one expression of these feelings at that moment, but it's more.²⁹

For Kantor Oehlen's invocation of such post war painterly language stops short of 'absolutist claims to the transcendental power of gesture in itself'. Kantor suggests that Oehlen keeps his 'inner Abstract Expressionist' at arms length. His inner existentialist, however, would seem to be a much closer companion. He writes 'Oehlen has said that all of his abstract paintings come from an inability to paint what he wants to paint. Nevertheless, the paintings embody the dialectical push-and-pull of "I can't, but I must" that characterizes much challenging art'.³⁰ Once again Beckett is summoned from the grave in the name of 'fidelity to failure' — where the inability to act constitutes, or gives ground for, 'an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation'.³¹

Rubinstein answers his own question of whether the gestural language of Oehlen, Wool and Humphries can be read as sincere in a follow up essay to 'Provisional Painting', entitled 'To Rest Lightly on the Earth'.³² In it he aligns contemporary concerns with the impossibility of painting with a return to doubt and inner experience as defined during the post war period by artists like Alberto Giacometti. While Rubinstein stops short of investigating the socio-

cultural conditions that have prompted the re-emergence of 'failing better' he suggests that painters are rediscovering the existential as material to their medium, reclaiming the likes of Newman and the 'tutelary spirit of Samuel Beckett'.³³

Arguably, the existential angst provoked by the loss of optimism and the perceived failure of language in the aftermath of World War II has parallels to the trauma of the contemporary period, and the subsequent shifts in painting that re-engage with the limits of representation and the inexpressible. The sublime, though rarely named directly as such, has returned to circulation during a period of renewed psychological and metaphysical upheaval. As Christine Battersby points out, 'the landscape of the twentieth-first century has been transformed by a new kind of 'terror', as well as by a new type of encounter with 'the various and multiple forms of otherness'.³⁴ Nuclear paranoia, fiscal oblivion, religious fanaticism and ecological catastrophe contribute to a period that could justifiably be termed a new age of anxiety — an age that returns us to something close to Burke's conception of the sublime fuelled by terror and privation.

It is privation or absence that the provisional turns on. The provisional is lack — the lack of finish, the lack of means and method with which to articulate what is entirely beyond language. Rubinstein aligns the commitment to the derelict or failed in painting to the history of negation and self-criticality within twentieth century art here outlined. In terms reminiscent of Clark, Rubinstein states, 'The history of modernism is full of strategies of refusal and acts of negation'.³⁵ Along the way he cites Philip Guston's statement from 1966 that what persists from Newman and the Abstract Expressionists is not a question of style, but instead the issue of whether it's possible to create in our society at all.³⁶ The deconstructive wipe of solvent, the *figure* of erasure that cleaves Oehlen's *FM 45* apart leaves the question open. It returns us to the matter of threshold. The work oscillates between limit and the potential of its transcendence. The presentation of error, the exposure of the do-over, is visual testimony to sense of failure that initiates a Mobius band-like experience of time where beginning and end conflate into endless succession

and repetition. Rubinstein concludes that it is the strategies of negation, the resistance to taste — the ‘complete lack of pretense’ that marks provisional painting ‘as belonging to *NOW*’.³⁷

Employed to position such downward looking painting on the vanguard of the contemporary situation Rubinstein’s capitalized *NOW* returns us to Barnett Newman’s trenchant and oft-cited statement, ‘The Sublime is Now’. Might Rubinstein be leaving enough interpretational wriggle-room to suggest that provisional painting — this painting of the half-attained, the indefinite, the squitchy, the ambivalent and the abject — belongs to the *Now* of the sublime, an instant extrapolated to the infinite, defined, as Newman comments, by ‘the physical *sensation* of time’?³⁸ Like Beckett’s characters we are condemned to ‘know the anguishing nature of time that has been de-narrativised’ where ‘each moment appears to us as monadically self-contained, unrelated to what proceeded it and to what may follow it’.³⁹

Newman’s *Now* figures centrally in Jean François Lyotard’s correlation between negation and the modern sublime. Lyotard suggests that it is a kind of Nietzschean sublime that has provoked these destructive, nihilistic tendencies and given modern and postmodern art its ‘impetus’ and the ‘logic of the avant-gardes find its axioms’.⁴⁰ Like Beckett, Lyotard invests waiting with negative value. It carries the possibility that nothing may come, both in terms of inability — the lack of facility or paralysis — and in terms of the immanent arrival of *the* nothing — the infinite void, which snuffs out ‘light, language and life’.⁴¹ Such a void, Lyotard argues, is at the heart of modern artistic endeavor stripped of representation and the patronage of religion. His conception of the sublime in a postmodern context is that which puts forward the un-presentable in presentation itself. He draws on the experience of painting and the painting experience to establish *Now* as a contingent, indeterminate articulation of time — an in-between state loaded with a kind of torture that Lyotard relates to the genealogy of the sublime from Longinus through Edmund Burke’s privations to Immanuel Kant and the notion of negative presentation. Lyotard states that

This is the misery that the painter faces with the plastic surface, of the musician with the acoustic surface [...] Not only faced with the empty canvas or the empty page, at the beginning of the work, but every time something has to be waited for, and thus forms the question at every point of questioning, at every 'and what now?'⁴²

Post representation, the medium of painting, perhaps more than any other, intrinsically leans towards the question of the non-demonstrable, and dialogizes the tension between impossibility and the obligation to express. The hit of the sublime, the sudden fleeting feeling of anxious *delight* (to use Burke's phrase) forced from between the contradictory states of pleasure and pain is only actuated at a degree of remove, at distance from the source of pain, in the experience of relief that reverses poles, from negative to positive. Rather than nothing there is an occurrence, an event, or for Beckett an 'occasion', even if it is repetition. Lyotard remarks that 'In the determination of pictorial art, the indeterminate, the 'it happens' is the paint, the picture'.⁴³ Silence and the end of language is postponed, even if only temporarily, through the event — through tactics of disruption, reduction and sabotage; through Newman's vertical 'zip', Christopher Wool's ambivalent gesture, and the smear of Oehlen's fingers. While devoid of the grandiloquence of the *grand style* the fundamental task for the modern and postmodern painter remains that which occupied the artists of the romantic period. As Lyotard makes clear, that task remains 'bearing pictorial or otherwise expressive witness to the inexpressible'.⁴⁴

This task — the 'demonstration of the existence of the invisible in the visual' — is ultimately one that is doomed to failure.⁴⁵ To represent pure idea would be to enforce a relative state upon the absolute, a context that proves immediately contradictory and subsequently undermines the premise. In pointing up the impossibility that confronts the painter in the modern period and beyond in their efforts to answer the question 'What is painting?' Lyotard lays the foundations for Rubinstein's conception of the provisional in painting. Lyotard argues that while representation of the absolute may be impossible, the presentation or demonstration of its existence is not — through 'negative

representation', which Kant called the 'abstract'.⁴⁶ The end results, which Lyotard categorizes, in relation to public taste, as 'monstrous' 'purely 'negative' non-entities', subverts the 'communal sense of shared pleasure' that props up the beautiful and privileges subjectivity over the objective, over the relational, nostalgic and referential.⁴⁷ For Rubinstein the end results culminate not so much in the *monstrous*, but in a more unstable formlessness — a formlessness of the neglected, disintegrated, defaced, and derelict. With or without a postmodern nudge-and-a-wink, the contemporary vocabulary of the provisional is a return to surface, to mid-century concerns with the materiality of painterly mark. However, such contemporary gestural abstraction resists the textural monumentality of postwar painting. It resists the thickness, the physical presence of European Art Informel painting or the overwhelming scale of American Abstract Expressionism, in favor of a fragile form of painterly expression. Where, for example, Willem de Kooning's livid, insistent and heavily accumulated slashes of impasto paint made a declarative gesture of adventure on a new visual frontier, Wool, Humphries and Oehlen produce a less physically present material surface, frequently defined by the removal of paint, by the possibility of non-existence — or by the possibility of existence erased — by the gesture of misadventure.

Lyotard locates the postmodern sublime within conditions of language. The matter of the sublime, its material concern, in the end is the silence that descends when forms or 'phrases' within a given lexicon prove inadequate to experience. The silence makes explicit the limit of expression encountered at the threshold of understanding; at this point language is incapacitated. In articulating the nondemonstrable, Lyotard writes, painters find themselves facing not just the question 'What is painting', but also 'How do we communicate our painting to those who are not painters?' inferring that there is a potentially terminal linguistic disparity between work and spectator.⁴⁸ Presentation, as a kind of temporal irruption, testifies to an event that 'despite everything within this threatening void' postpones the bitter end and supersedes defunct and moribund conventions of language.⁴⁹ Discussing Newman's painting Lyotard comments

The message is the presentation, but it presents nothing; it is, that is presence [...] Newman is concerned with giving color, line or rhythm the force of an obligation with a face to face relationship, in the second person, and his model cannot be *look at this (over there)*; it must be *look at me* or, to be more accurate, *listen to me*. For obligation is a modality of time rather than of space and its organ is the ear rather than the eye.⁵⁰

Lyotard here re-orientates painting towards the facility of language — towards an abstraction of the spoken word — severed from the meta-narrative of the sublime. In doing so he alludes to a fundamental shift within the discourse of the concept. He suggests that Newman's *Now*, the vocabulary of 'color, line and rhythm' that refers to nothing other than the unmediated physical sensation of time, contests Edmund Burke's insistence that painting was incapable of meeting the demands of sublime experience due to a persistent residue of (figurative) representation and that poetry — 'what we would now call writing' — was most capable, with its 'infinite number of associations for the mind', of meeting the challenge that sublime experience presented.⁵¹

In the postmodern period the splintering of the cultural landscape has led to a reversal of Burke's hierarchy. Over burdened with symbolic association and the literature of the sublime, it is the written word that now collapses under the weight of representation. As Lyotard remarks, 'The task of having to bear witness to the indeterminate carries away, one after the other, the barriers set up by the writings of theorists and by the manifestos of the painters themselves'.⁵² The 'unheard of phrase', the form that exceeds cognitive perimeters, destabilizes the terms of discourse. The visual language of painting, ambivalent to the tyranny of such discourse, provides the linguistic means for a concept in perpetual crisis to remain articulate after a failure of language. In the face of such a failure the *provisionality* of painting, its particular and intrinsic subjectivity, ensures that a 'literature of the unword' remains a viable proposition.

The Sublime is Dead: Long Live the Sublime

As the 2010 Tate research project, 'The Sublime Object: Nature, Art and Language', attests, the sublime is once again now.⁵³ In truth, despite being the concept that dare not speak its name for prolonged periods of the twentieth century, due in part to perceived latent religious tendencies and association with moribund classical, representational traditions, the sublime has, nevertheless, always been present even if it hasn't always taken this name. As its critical currency has surged over recent years, so too has the complexity of the concept. It is widely accepted that the sublime is again in crisis. Where once it could be safely approached through reassuringly recognizable and theologically pertinent signs — the awe-inspiring landscape, the impenetrable dark, animal terror — with the advent of modernism the territory of the concept shifted towards a secular articulation of transcendence. This shift prompted a re-calibration of the notion of the sacred itself. There is a consensus among contemporary writers that the pluralist postmodern culture has prompted a fracturing of the concept into seemingly endless sub-clauses. The convenient malleability of the concept, its readiness to lend a sense of gravitas to that which is speculatively declared subjective or indeterminate has seen the sublime become something of an art school cure-all.

As a contributor to the Tate project the writer Simon Morley comments that his recent book, *The Sublime* (2010), is an attempt to make sense of the bewildering proliferation of readings of the sublime. Chameleon-like, the concept is able to change colors at will. Despite this the historical baggage that the concept carries remains heavy and intrusive. Subsequently the concept is caught between a past that undermines the case for the contemporary sublime and a future that is fatally fragmented. As Morley writes

Discussions of the sublime in contemporary art can sometimes be covert or camouflaged devices for talking about the kinds of things that were once addressed by religious discourses and nevertheless seem to remain pertinent

within an otherwise religiously skeptical and secularized world.

But often contemporary perspectives on the sublime reject traditional conceptions of a self, or a soul or spirit, seen as moving upwards towards some ineffable and essential thing or power. Instead, the contemporary sublime is mostly about immanent transcendence; that is, it is about a transformative experience understood as occurring within the here and now.⁵⁴

Stripped of theologically inclined elevation the postmodern sublime lowers its gaze from the heavens to witness transcendence reconfigured through contingency — through a certain sense of the abject. Without the stabilizing religious associations of the pre-modern period the concept has encroached into far less optimistic neighboring territories. Limit-experience, divested of a final divine reckoning, spills over into the existential — into materialist interpretations of self-revelation that purposefully disrupt symbolic orders and conceptual hierarchies. Under these terms, as alluded to by Lyotard in his theory of the unrepresentable and the avant-garde, the sublime's negative, somewhat cannibalistic drive serves to corrupt the past and its codes. While Bataille resists invoking the sublime by name his theories on inner experience nevertheless provide a compelling proposition of how experience of the sacred might function in the absence of God.

Whether employed in hair-gel advertising, football commentary or in the appraisal of contemporary art works the term sublime has, itself, become boundless. If painting is impossible so too is the taming of a concept of transcendence that has devolved and fractured so substantially. It would seem that the sublime revelation of self in contemporary terms is first to be found in the sense of inadequacy experienced when confronted with the exponentially expanding lexicon of associative terms and their resultant forms. Throughout this research project I have continually been asked to qualify, clarify and restrain the terms employed — to contain the many phrases and terms that run into each other in relation that to the sublime. Herein lies the problematic central to the research — that of categorizing the uncategorizable

— that of containing the boundless — that of locating language forms for the unsayable. The core of this problematic is the failure of language, that is, the inability of the word to accommodate a contemporary discourse of the sublime.

There is a view among certain writers that the concept has ceased to be serviceable, that the narrative of the word or the *literature* of the sublime has become over burdened with historical and aesthetic baggage, each phrase framing an association — the ineffable with pre-modern romanticism and the gothic, the inexpressible with the modern, and the un-presentable with the excess and spectacle of the post-modern. Describing the sublime as ‘damaged goods’ in his essay ‘Against the Sublime’, the art historian and critic James Elkins considers that the sublime is not just in crisis but that it in its death throes.⁵⁵ He writes

I think the sublime needs to be abandoned as an interpretive tool, except in cases of romantic and belated romantic art. Contemporary writers that use the word can always find synonyms to express what they mean, and those synonyms are apt to be more telling, and more useful, than the word sublime.⁵⁶

Elkins goes on to call for a moratorium on the term sublime and a redress of language in favor of ‘fresh’ and ‘exact’ terms.⁵⁷ Through studio practice this research asks if painting can facilitate this redress and provide these terms.

The sublime has surely little to do with exact-ness. The precise and the qualified are necessarily at odds with an encounter with that which exceeds cognition and understanding. It is absolute *in-exactness* or, as George Bataille would have it ‘non-knowledge’, that props up such experience. Bataille writes

Ultimate possibility. That non-knowledge still be knowledge. I would explore night! But no, it is night which explores me [...] Death quenches my thirst for

non-knowledge. But absence is not rest. Absence and death are without reply within me and, without fail, absorb me cruelly.⁵⁸

Under such conditions we grope for language, as though in darkness, and at the point of its failure all we are left with is feeling.

The aim of this thesis is not to attempt the impossible — to define the sublime or to impose a conceptual structure on subjective, transcendent experience. Instead it is to create a body of work that expands the material language of the sublime through painting as negation — through painting as a destructive business. Rather than containing or constraining language this research considers that the sublime necessarily demands an expansion of terms, a renewal of language forms, away from the word and its attendant nostalgia, towards the direct and the operative. Bataille marks this differential in his oblique articulation of the subversion of language under Formless in the Critical Dictionary of the Documents project. Here he states, 'A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks'.⁵⁹ Bataille advocates a de-limiting of language through a shift from descriptive effect to material affect. In this sense abstraction is an operation that disassociates language from its received hierarchy of imagery and narrative. This process has a downward trajectory, it is corrosive — as Bataille makes plain when he states 'Thus *formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world'.⁶⁰ This corrupting process results in a point of cognitive and linguistic rupture, creating a non-verbal 'space which is *interior* and *sovereign*, locked by the Unspeakable which exists at its margins, an impossible abyss glimpsed at the moment of transgression'.⁶¹ This research considers that it is within this space that an abject language of painting can be said to function.

An Other Discourse: How Paint Moves

It is not the sublime that is in crisis — rather it is its discourse. While writers like Phillip Shaw, Guy Sircello and Jane Forsey stop short of Elkin's insistence that the term be altogether abandoned they do, however, submit to a general view that postmodern plurality has irrevocably infected and diluted the concept and that the inherent contradictions at its core make an overarching coherence largely unachievable. Once again, *impossibility* rears its ugly head. James Elkins cites Peter De Bolla's distinction between discourse on the sublime and discourse of the sublime as further evidence of what Phillip Shaw describes as the "absurdity of spanning the gulf between the theoretical and the practical".⁶² *Discourse on the sublime* is located within a historical narrative. It seeks to contain or measure the concept through analysis of forms, causes and effects. In his investigation, 'How is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?' Guy Sircello labels such discourse as 'talk' about the sublime — chatter about the usefulness, sustainability and coherence of the concept that depends upon or contributes to the ongoing dialogue within the subject between what Elkin terms 'external authorities' — the ambassadors of the critical and historical institution.⁶³ The language of this dialogue is epistemological and descriptive — it offers the sublime in proxy, reliant on hand-me-down associative references, images and symbols. Such an overburdened lexicon has become prone to slippage, as the sublime has accumulated an ever-expanding list of prefixes, from the pre-modern gothic to the post-modern technological.

Discourse of the sublime on the other hand is located within in an experiential account of the concept. In contrast to the din of the talk about the sublime, discourse of the sublime privileges what might be termed a language of silence — one that serves an interrogation of religious experience in the absence of God. This deconsecrated confrontation with self is to be found in the "interior mind" — within direct, subjective experience.⁶⁴ Where talk about the sublime describes and measures effect, *discourse of* the concept actuates

sublime affect. Such discourse, while cognizant of the literature of history that surrounds it, is far from bound to it. Sircello's account of the prospects of a concept compromised by the inherent contradictions of a logic that seeks to reconcile experience that exceeds the territory of knowledge, cognition and language within material, objective reality is ultimately optimistic. His 'argument against theory' suggests that there is a need to expand the terms of discourse to include the experiential through alternative poetic forms of language.⁶⁵ While Sircello frames such a re-orientation within the written word, visual language is an implicit associate. Citing Wordsworth, Lao-tzu's Tao te Ching and avant-garde prose Sircello defines a certain 'nothingness' common to Bataille's theory of inner experience — 'one of the sources of the recent revival of interest in the sublime'.⁶⁶ The language of inner experience is that of abjection. Formlessness leans towards the visual, towards the possibility of seeing as knowledge.

While sharing none of Sircello's optimism, Elkins too would seem to concede that sublime discourse could be receptive to, or accommodating of, the potential of alternative forms of language. He comments that 'the sublime cannot be adequately explored unless the writing finds a way to move back and forth from discourse *on* to discourse *of*.'⁶⁷ This research considers that painting might offer the vehicle to move between these distinct but not mutually exclusive species of discourse. In this sense the relationship between theory and studio practice is direct and integral to the research — the language of painting is approached as *discourse of the sublime*.

Recent commentary on the sublime has positioned painting on the margins of the discourse. Viewed predominantly as witness to overwhelming mass media and the violence of history, the language of the sublime in painting has largely been determined by image, spectacle and scale. There is very limited research into how the sublime might be articulated through the material language of [figurative] abstraction. Consequently there is limited understanding of how mark making, gesture and material process in painting might relate to the term sublimation. Painting was conspicuous in its absence

from the Tate *Sublime Object* research project, perhaps because, as Simon Morley states, 'most sublime artworks these days tend to be installations. It is certainly getting harder for painting, the traditional vessel for evoking visual sublimity, to elicit such effects'.⁶⁸ This thesis examines Morley's position by asking if paint is an intrinsically transcendent medium and by considering how the composition of the un-presentable may be alluded to through de-composition in painting.

At the center of this research is the figure/ground relationship. This binary serves as foundation for what I would describe as an expressionist enquiry into the relationship between mark, surface and the sublime. The term expressionist is consciously employed, evoking as it does 'The postwar paintbrush' and the primacy of authorship, authenticity and materiality.⁶⁹ In doing so the research approaches the issue of whether sublime experience, driven by sincerity, faith and commitment to subjectivity, can function in relation to painting in a postmodern age determined by skepticism, irony, pastiche and citation.

Necessarily heuristic in approach the research engages with subjective, felt experience in painting characterized by and articulated through the primacy of gestural abstraction — through a Jacqueline Humphries or a Christopher Wool *thin-ness* rather than the post-war *thickness* of Dubuffet's soupy *haute pate* of oil paint mixed with sand, gravel, tar, plaster, coal and drying agents. In this sense the research is a question of mark over matter.

Common to the work of the 'provisional' painters cited by Rubinstein is the primacy of the material qualities of paint — or more specifically the material qualities of gesture. Rather than through the physical, concrete presence of post-war *matiere* painting the 'competitive interaction between the artist, his tools and his medium', to use Jean Dubuffet's phrase, is instead manifest through a vocabulary of subtraction, erasure and correction — through gesture as negation.⁷⁰ Fundamental to the sublime is the idea of the disruption or destabilization of the harmonious. Destabilization is central to the

painting process of contemporary painter Charlene Von Heyl. She comments that

When you create something indifferent and destroy, transform, and manipulate that into something that you can't quite read anymore, but that has a strong feeling of atmosphere, then you have created something new; this process of extraction is actually quite brutal. I find that when I start working again, I always have to get to the point where I really disrespect my work.⁷¹

These strategies of abstraction and disruption determine an approach to painting as a kind of corrosive process — a downward movement between states, from presence to absence, object to subject, form to formless. Von Heyl likens the process to sabotage. She states 'Sabotage is always a kind of violent change, the sabot — a wooden clog — thrown into the machinery, creating a new situation through disruption or destruction'.⁷² Such tactics rely on intuition to navigate an area of indeterminacy found between representation and abstraction. This area of 'becoming' characterizes the distinction made by Lyotard and, to a greater extent, Gilles Deleuze between figuration, rooted in illustrative form relating 'to an object that it is supposed to represent', and the 'figural', bound to form 'related to sensation' — sensation that is 'transmitted directly, and avoids the detour and boredom of conveying a story'.⁷³ The transmission or communication of such sensation from one 'order' to another, to use Francis Bacon's term, is a process of corruption or deformation; it is a matter of movement or the movement of matter.

In simple terms this research serves an ongoing fascination with how oil paint moves, with its particular fluidity and its unpredictable kinetic potential — a potential that mediates between control and accident, intent and intuition, the nascent and the moribund, between expression and its limit. In this respect the 'clog' thrown into the machinery is the smear of a finger, the catastrophic drag of a rag or the erasing scythe of the brush or blade. This downward movement becomes a process of painting that negotiates between figurative source and *figural* outcome. Largely focused on the figure under abstraction,

studio research experiments with a language of failure embodied in the smear and other catastrophes — catastrophes that corrupt image, corrode the figure and defile surface. In particular the smear is explored in relation to abjection, which Julia Kristeva conceives of as a ‘wellspring of sign for the non-object’ that destabilizes the distinction between ‘*symptom*: a language that gives up [...] a non-assimilable alien [...] a cancer that the listening devices of the unconscious do not hear’ and sublimation as the ‘possibility of naming the pre-nominal, the pre-objectal’.⁷⁴

The smear forces slippage, under its influence phrases within painting shift from the legible to the unreadable. The territory between these states is constantly oscillating; subjectivity propels the work back and forth between past and future tense, between its pictorial origins and its aspirational presence. The fundamental oppositions of inside/outside, I/Other, conscious/unconscious that Kristeva alludes to are pushed and pulled into ambiguity. Delivered directly with fingers the smear drives pictorial structure to collapse — the boundaries of body (both in terms of work and author) become indistinct. The compositional membrane is stretched to the point of tearing and held there at tension between one thing and another — between presentation and the un-representable, between the open and closed form. This is the tension that Francis Bacon alludes to when he describes a ‘complete interlocking of image and paint, so that the image is the paint and vice versa’.⁷⁵

My painting process is defined by the search for, or the navigation of this tipping point where a fleeting relationship between marks made in paint communicates image, articulates feeling and divests resonance. Citing George Didi-Huberman’s interest in Bataille’s *Informe*, Yve-Alain Bois describes this tipping point as ‘*a rhythmic condition of form*’ found ‘*once the human face is decomposed and resemblances ‘shriek’*’.⁷⁶ Focusing on the figure in relation to gesture and abstraction the research investigates a visual language of direct forms, largely through the erasive or subtractive mark. Using the idiom of the portrait the project explores painting as a felt

experience through the feeling of paint — under fingers, brushes, blades and rags. This materiality of gesture is here embodied in techniques of abrasion, blurring, smearing, dragging, scraping, and scoring and in self-cancelling strategies of production that drive the spectator from image to surface, from illustration to intuition, from the optic to the haptic — from seeing to feeling.

Through experimentation with the textural, physical properties of mediums, varnishes and supports the research looks at what Charlene Von Heyl has obliquely referred to as ‘speed in painting’.⁷⁷ This might be described as variation in perception through the experience of material surface — or how variation in surface and material gesture ‘sucks the eye in’ — resulting in ‘seeing as a triggering and an experiencing’.⁷⁸ Correlation between the plastic and the perceptual is articulated by Deleuze in his discussion of painting as what he terms an ‘analogical language par excellence’ — ‘a language of relations, which consists of expressive movements, paralinguistic signs, breaths and screams, and so on’.⁷⁹ In this sense the research investigates the tension between fast and slow, between open and closed language forms in painting — between direct gesture and indirect effect, between the *malerisch* and the taped-off, between wetness and dryness, gloss and matt, between the smear and the drip.

This research considers the possibility that where the sublime is failed by language painting takes over. Conscious of the central problematic of sublime theory — that of the limit of the word in relation to that which exceeds description and critical faculty — a reflective approach is applied to the relationship between theory, or critical thinking, and practice, or thinking in paint. In this respect the research aims to create a body of work that expands the *discourse of* the sublime through painting as a corrosive, self-destructive business — through a material language whose spirit is not that of cohesion, resolution and conformity, but rather that of restlessness, fracture and failure; a material language of ‘expressive movements’ that drives sublime/inner experience downwards from the vertical to the horizontal, from elevation to the abject — revealing what Bataille refers to as the ‘disjunction between the sacred and transcendental substance (consequently impossible to create)’.⁸⁰

While Forsey and Elkins condemn the sublime with evidence of its inherently contradictory nature, Bataille suggests that it is this irreconcilable logic that continues to make the 'quest' and its 'indeterminable object' viable. Bataille writes 'The conditions for the search were, moreover, obscurity and the limitless character of the goal that it had resolved to attain'.⁸¹ *Discourse of the sublime* itself necessarily remains indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable, boggy and squitchy.

¹ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick or, The Whale*, ed. by Andrew Delbanco and Tom Quirk (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 13

² Burke's influence on Melville is well documented, notably by Barbara Glenn who outlines Melville's subversion of the upward dynamic of the sublime in her paper 'Melville and the Sublime in Moby Dick', *American Literature*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (May, 1976), pp. 165-192

³ George Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. by Leslie Anne Boldt, (Albany: University of New York Press, 1988), p. 5

⁴ Bill Beckley, *The Sticky Sublime*, (New York: Allworth Press, 2001), p. 72

⁵ T. J. Clark, 'Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 9, No. 1, (Sept. 1982), pp. 139-156

⁶ Ibid, p. 153

⁷ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, (New York: Gove Press, 2004), p. 76

⁸ Kyle Gann, *No Such Thing as Silence: John Cage's 4. 33"*, (London: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 157

⁹ Branden W. Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the neo-avant-garde*, (London: MIT Press, 2007), p. 31

¹⁰ Vincent Katz, 'Robert Rauschenberg: A Genteel Iconoclasm', *Tate Etc.*, Issue 8, Autumn 2006, p. 31

¹¹ Ibid, p. 33

¹² Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith, (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 8

¹³ Ibid, p. 61

¹⁴ Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (London: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 20

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with George Duthuit*, (London: John Calder Publishers, 1999), p. 125

¹⁷ Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, op. cit, p. 17

¹⁸ T. J. Clark, 'Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art', pp. 153-154

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Michael Fried, 'How Modernism Works: A Response to T. J. Clark', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 9 No. 1 (1982), pp. 217-234

²¹ Ibid, p. 223

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- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood, in Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Battock, (New York, 1968), pp. 123-124
- ²⁴ Raphael Rubinstein, 'Provisional Painting', *Art in America*, (May 2009), p. 131
- ²⁵ Ibid, p. 134
- ²⁶ Jordan Kantor, 'Hand Apart: Albert Oehlen's "Fingermalerei 2008', *Art Forum*, (Summer 2011), pp. 336-339
- ²⁷ Ibid, p. 337
- ²⁸ Ibid, 339
- ²⁹ Albert Oehlen in Conversation with Judicael Lavrador, *Albert Oehlen, Exhibition Catalogue*, Carre D'Art, Nimes Museum of Contemporary Art, October 2011 (not paginated)
- ³⁰ Jordan Kantor, 'Hand Apart: Albert Oehlen's "Fingermalerei 2008', p. 339
- ³¹ Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with George Duthuit*, p.125
- ³² Raphael Rubinstein, 'Provisional Painting Part II: To Rest Lightly on the Earth', *Art in America*, (February 2012), pp. 78-85
- ³³ Ibid, p. 85
- ³⁴ Christine Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Indifference*, (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 19
- ³⁵ Raphael Rubinstein, 'Provisional Painting', p. 123
- ³⁶ Philip Guston, 'Public Forum with Joseph Ablow, 1966', transcript in Clifford Ross, *Abstract Expressionism: Creators and Critics*, (New York: Abrams, 1990), pp. 63-75
- ³⁷ Raphael Rubinstein, 'To Rest Lightly on the Earth', p. 85
- ³⁸ Barnett Newman, 'Ohio, 1949', *Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. by John. P. O'Neill, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf. Inc, 1990), p. 175
- ³⁹ Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Becket, Rothko, Resnais*, p. 30
- ⁴⁰ Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 74
- ⁴¹ Jean François Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the Avant Garde', *The Sublime*, ed. by Simon Morley, (London: Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2010), p. 35
- ⁴² Ibid, p.29
- ⁴³ Ibid, p. 30
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Jean François Lyotard, *Presenting the Unpresentable, The Sublime* ed. Simon Morley, p. 134
- ⁴⁶ Ibid.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 133
- ⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 136
- ⁴⁹ Jean François Lyotard, 'Newman: The Instant', *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin, (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1989), p. 245
- ⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 242
- ⁵¹ Ibid, p. 245
- ⁵² Jean François Lyotard, *The Sublime and the Avant Garde*, p. 37
- ⁵³ Tate research project, *The Sublime Object*, was conducted between 2007 and 2010. Its stated aims were to achieve a greater understanding of the ways in which perceptions of the sublime in the external landscape are shaped by

cultural experiences, and to discover whether the sublime remains a legitimate concept in the contemporary world.

⁵⁴ Simon Morley, 'Staring into the Contemporary Abyss', *Tate Etc.*, issue 20, (September 2010), p. 73

⁵⁵ James Elkins, 'Against the Sublime', *Beyond the Finite: The Sublime in Art and Science*, ed. by Roald Hoffmann and Iain Boyd Whyte (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 20–42. [version accessed via author's website, www.jameselkins.com, 2013].

⁵⁶ Ibid, pp. 1-2

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ George Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. by Leslie Anne Boldt, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 111

⁵⁹ George Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-39*, trans. Allan Stoekl, (Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 31

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ George Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. ix

⁶² Phillip Shaw, *The Sublime*, (Oxon: Routledge. 2006), p. 123

⁶³ Guy Sircello, 'How is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 51: 4, (Fall 1993)

⁶⁴ James Elkins, 'Against the Sublime', p. 8

⁶⁵ Guy Sircello, 'How is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?', p. 549

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 543

⁶⁷ Ibid, p.9

⁶⁸ Simon Morley, 'Staring into the Contemporary Abyss', p. 74

⁶⁹ Lawrence Alloway's term is referenced by Andrew R. Lee in his essay 'Vulgar Pictures: Bacon and de Kooning, and the Figure under Abstraction', *Art History*, Vol. 35, 2 (March 2012) pp. 372-393

⁷⁰ F. Morris, *Paris Post War: Art and Existentialism 45-55*, (London: Tate Gallery, 1993), p79.

⁷¹ Claire Barliant and Christopher Turner, 'Charlene Von Heyl: Painting Paradox', *Modern Painters*, (Summer 2009), p. 45-46

⁷² John Kelsey, '1000 Words: Charlene Von Heyl', *Artforum*, (October, 2008), p. 331

⁷³ Gilles Deleuze, referencing Paul Valéry in *The Logic of Sensation*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith, (London: Continuum 2003), p. 36

⁷⁴ Julia Kristva, 'Approaching Abjection', *The Sublime*, ed. by Simon Morley, p. 162

⁷⁵ Francis Bacon, *Matthew Smith: Paintings from 1909-52*, exh. cat Tate Gallery, (London, 1953) p. 12.

⁷⁶ Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A Users Guide*, (New York, Zone Books, 1997), p. 80

⁷⁷ Charlene Vob Heyl, interviewed by Shirley Kaneda, *Bomb*, (Autumn, 2010) (not paginated)

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sensation*, p. 113

⁸⁰ George Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-39*, p. 242

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 240

Image available at www.moma.org/collection

Figure. 2 Barnett Newman
Onement I 1948
(Oil on masking tape on canvas, 69 x 41 cm)

‘Gods, too, decompose’. George Bataille ¹

Published by the poet Ruth Stephan and the painter John Stephan in nine quarterly issues between 1947 and 1949, *The Tiger’s Eye* magazine positioned itself as an actively inclusive conduit for the ideas, art and literature of the immediate post war period. As outlined by Pamela Frank’s history of the magazine the publication maintained an avowedly open-door policy that sought to capitalize on and promote cultural cross-pollination, incorporating contributions from the creative communities of New York, from where it was produced, as well as those from around the world.²

Whilst its editors eschewed an overtly programmatic agenda, committing themselves ‘not to make a paradigm’, insisting on themselves as observers rather than critics, nevertheless, the publication was strident in its will to stimulate creative confrontation.³ The magazine rejected traditional conventions of review and commentary in favor of a structure orientated towards work itself — towards the provocative juxtaposition of both the visual and the written. Polemics were held at arms length by an editorial focus on direct observation, on experience over dogma. For the contributors to the magazine the written word should compliment rather than countermand; they declared in the first issue, ‘any text on art will be handled as literature’.⁴

Issue six was published in December 1948 and was dedicated to the sublime (Figure. 3). Calling aesthetic hierarchies into question, its stated aim was a democratization of the concept as ‘the visitor of many and the not the exclusive guest of the rhetorical thinker or of religiosity’.⁵ Noting that ‘medieval definitions have long been outmoded’, elevation could no longer be held as an unimaginable realm. The magazine’s editorial statement maintained that the moment science had conquered ‘cloud stratas’ any association with mystery and divinity had been undone. The sublime was ‘again an abstraction demanding symbols for revelation’. Stripped of familiarity and context, any such symbols subsequently demanded a re-evaluation of language as mediator of abstraction. Issue five, published in October 1948, declared, ‘We

must realize that a sentence is not the only packmule for an idea. It is in the realm of the pictorial where language can find new expressions of reality'.⁶



Figure. 3 John Stephan, *Untitled*, 1947 (oil on canvas, 18 x 24")

The Tiger's Eye cover issues 1-4

This turn to the pictorial is well illustrated in the sublime issue, which afforded a large page count to painting, including works by, among others, Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, Max Ernst, Ad Reinhardt and Barnett Newman. Through his relationship with Betty Parsons, whose gallery served the art and artists of

the magazine, Newman was an ardent supporter and regular contributor to the publication, as artist and theorist, creative and commentator. The Sublime issue of *The Tiger's Eye* carried his brief but influential essay, 'The Sublime is Now'. Declarative and confrontational, Newman's text seeks to contextualize modern American painting outside western European traditions where, in his view, the sublime had continued to be propped up with myth, legend and archaic values, values associated to a greater or lesser degree with religion. Newman's argument seeks to re-draw the territory of the sublime to accommodate (pure) abstraction. However, he does so by drawing almost exclusively upon a historical narrative. Though the concept of the sublime had once again become abstract, its discourse evidently remained shackled to 'literature' — to the memory, association and symbolic order intrinsic to language and aesthetics. Weighed down with the accumulated baggage of the concept's complex narrative 'the sentence' ultimately falls short in its function to delineate, categorize or describe the subjective visual experience of the painting published in the sublime issue.

Newman included his then recent painting *Two Edges* (Figure. 4), generally considered to be the immediate precursor to *Onement I* (Figure. 2, January 1948) — the painting that the artist considered his breakthrough in relation to form, subject and matters of the sublime. For Newman *Two Edges* was a transitional work. Modest in scale (48 x 36") and in portrait, it moved beyond his early biomorphic paintings like *Genesis – The Break* (1946) towards the formal economy of work that followed in the wake of *Onement I*. Created with masking tape the vertical gestures of the work's title interrupt an earth-brown monochrome. The 'edges', prototypes of the 'zips' that would come to define Newman's post *Onement* period, are very different from one another. Bleeding under the tape has left a ragged, blunt quality to the left hand edge, with one side of the tape having been washed almost entirely into the tonal variations of the painting's surface — a surface which seems to carry the remnants of Newman's early more expansive, fluid, botanically inspired endeavors with abstraction.

Image available at www.moma.org/collection

Figure. 4 Barnett Newman, *Two Edges*, 1948
(Oil and tempera on canvas, 48 x 36")

On the other hand, the right 'zip' is rigid and unyielding to the surrounding umber ground. The edges here are hard, clean, and declarative — a searing gesture conjured through intense tonal contrast. While Newman's painting past can be read in the intuitive exploration and textural variation across a ground, characterized by thin washes of pigment, so too can be seen the formal economy of Newman's future. For Newman there was too much painting in *Two Edges*, too much of what he would subsequently dismiss as 'atmosphere'. Yet it also stands on the threshold of the reduced vocabulary of 'totality' he aspired to, where 'the beginning and the end are there at once. Otherwise, a painter is a kind of choreographer of space, and he creates a dance of elements, and it becomes a narrative art instead of a visual art'.⁷

Two Edges marks a shift from cognition, with its attendant processes of association to the corporeal and unfamiliar. Newman characterizes this shift in terms of a transition from *space* — constrained, 'institutional' and defined — to *place*, open and inconceivable. Exaltation, for Newman, was to be realized through 'open painting'.⁸

Though printed upside down and in black and white in *The Tiger's Eye*, the language of *Two Edges*, immediate, un-mediated, abstract, is in marked contrast to Newman's strident, referential, dogmatic text on the sublime. Exploring this tension between his writing and his painting reveals the inherently contradictory nature of a concept in crisis — disassociated not just from its historical and symbolic scaffolding but also from language itself.

After the terrors of global conflict the void is articulated with the material language of painting — silent and subjective. Reflecting upon the text of 'The Sublime is Now' alongside the painting *Two Edges* potentially opens a valuable perspective on how, in a contemporary context, the language of painting materially declares that the sublime is once again *Now*.

How Now Became Negative: Trauma and the Sublime.

We are freeing ourselves of the impediments of memory, association, nostalgia, legend, myth, or what have you, that have been the devices of Western European Painting.⁹

Reverberating, as it was, with the aftershocks of the Second World War, Newman's declaration that 'The Sublime is Now' is historically contingent. Held in tension between negative and positive, between past and future tense, between non-recuperable memory and the possibility of optimism, Newman's *Now* is an irruption in a linear narrative that exposes a fissure intrinsic to the aesthetic concept. The interrelation or oscillation between plus or minus values is at the foundations of the sublime's traditional logic, as traced through Burke, Kant and later Jean François Lyotard. Not for the first time the re-emergence of the concept occurred in the wake of historical events that provoked a need for a restatement of dignity, potential and a recalibration of faith — faith stripped of the divine.

A pattern of transposing or, more appropriately transcending, individual fear and collective trauma via cultural production can be traced back through the development of the sublime. As Gene Ray demonstrates, in his essay 'Reading the Lisbon Earthquake: Adorno, Lyotard, and the Contemporary Sublime', the concept and its manifestations have been shaped, to a greater or lesser degree, by the impact of 'catastrophic history'.¹⁰

Where previously this compensatory cultural processing — this sublimation of history — had favored positive aesthetic experience, legislating fallibility, inhumanity and the pain of memory through signs and symbols presented at a safe distance from the subject, several historical pivots set the sublime on a downward trajectory over the course of the modern and postmodern periods, reorienting its essential aesthetic bias towards negative presentation.

Ray credits Nicolas Boileau-Despreaux's 1674 French translation of Pseudo-Longinus's first century treatise on the sublime with the subsequent rise in

critical currency of the category — a rise that would eventually peak a century or so later with Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, published in 1756. Ray suggests that with its emphasis on intensity of feeling the sublime gained traction over the course of the eighteenth century thanks in no small part to the 'corporeal experiences' of an increasingly geographically mobile bourgeois encountering the power of nature on the Grand Tour. Terror and destruction glimpsed over Alpine precipices laid psychological and literary foundations for Burke's categories of privation, and for a language of negation.

Just a year prior to the publication of Burke's influential text on the aesthetics of the sublime, on the 1st November 1755 an earthquake obliterated the city of Lisbon, killing 'roughly a quarter of its 250,000 inhabitants and damaging towns and villages from Morocco to France. Tremors were felt throughout Europe, and tidal surges observed in Finland and at the mouth of the Elbe'.¹¹ Whether experienced directly or at safe remove, through countless extensive witness accounts, this catastrophe presented terror as a sensorial, bodily encounter on an unimaginable and incomprehensible scale. The narrative of this event and its subsequent impact on collective psychology was detailed in a radio broadcast for children by Walter Benjamin in 1931. Benjamin draws upon the written account of an English eyewitness to portray the near biblical scale of the devastation brought about by one of the largest earthquakes ever to be recorded. This disaster 'preoccupied the entire world like few other events in that century', shaking consciousness and belief to the core.¹² Benjamin alludes, albeit indirectly — due no doubt to the age of his audience — to its seismic effect on the philosophical landscape, pointing out that one of the notable subsequent accounts published was produced by Immanuel Kant.

The Lisbon Earthquake was Kant's *Now*. He published three separate treatises relating to an event whose 'massive, scaring, overwhelmingly powerful materiality' proved to be 'an essential moment, if not *the* essential moment, in the transformation of European thought that made it finally modern'.¹³ Such was the destructive force of the earthquake that faith — blind and irreproachable — was shattered. The 'notion of infinity previously located in

God' — ordered, just, and purposeful — suffered a tectonic collapse that would force a paradigm shift from the speculative to the experiential in Kant's work. Prior to the earthquake he had framed his approach to the relationship between nature, God and human capacity with divine metaphysics. After the cataclysm, where speculative and philosophical accounts had ultimately come up short both in descriptive and explanatory terms, Kant assumed a more observational outlook through the more materially conscious language of 'causality' and science. In the aftershocks of the Lisbon Earthquake, the conception of the sublime, a core of Kant's aesthetics, shifts from the infinite cosmos to the violence and grit of physical event and material process. For Kant, the negative experience of encountering what is beyond our grasp, beyond our limits both physically and intellectually, is ultimately resolved positively in the possibility for knowledge — in the very awareness of the limits of capacity. He maintains that it is the confrontation with this potentiality that triggers or constitutes sublime feeling. The divine is experienced negatively — as an absence of God. In the search for this absolute Kant lowers his eyes from the heavens to the ground beneath his feet, to the sulphurous eruptions and boiling hot springs he witnessed in Toplitz in Bohemia. Kant's recalibration of the sublime towards 'human freedom' springs from a landscape turned to a 'sea of fire', from abject desolation.¹⁴

Kant's faith in possibility, in an ultimately positive extrapolation of natural cataclysm was not shared by all. In the face of such indiscriminate destruction and merciless, incomprehensible natural force faith in the inherently idealist values of a god-guided universe elsewhere gave way to pessimism. But if the Lisbon Earthquake was, as some viewed it, 'the death of optimism', Auschwitz, crucial to the reading of Newman's *Now*, was the death of language which precipitated a radical overhaul of Kant's formulation of the sublime.¹⁵ Ray uses the writing of Theodor Adorno to account for the impact of collective trauma on the concept, citing the holocaust in particular. Any lingering positivity is here stripped from sublime experience. Where traditionally the destructive and overwhelming force of nature was recuperable through the progress of knowledge, reason and self, the violence of the holocaust left the self bereft of the final revelatory reward offered by idealism's

steady march to future perfection. Ray states that 'The compensatory, second stage pleasure of the traditional sublime, anchored in metaphysical optimism, is no longer possible: after the industrialized genocide of the camps, all we are left with is the anguish of the imagination and a desolation of human dignity'.¹⁶

Where previously 'cloud stratas were beautiful billows for the imagination to soar through', elevation after the Second World War had little to do with rapture.¹⁷ Instead the skies were associated with fear and the annihilation of the material world. The idealism at the heart of the pre-modern sublime is transfigured beyond recognition by the unimaginable heat of atomic fission above Hiroshima — a heat that razes form and figure, leaving the contingent and the indeterminate. Though the editorial statement for the sublime issue of *The Tiger's Eye* 'wished' for the beginning of a greater sublimity 'apart from the tawdry, the picayune, the brutish', in the wake of collective trauma, it was just such (negative) language that would define the spirit of the modern and post-modern sublime.¹⁸

Barnett Newman: Dissident Surrealist

'The impulse of modern art was this desire to destroy beauty'.¹⁹

For Newman *Now* marks a point of rupture with western, specifically European, cultural history and the associated aesthetic philosophies. His text 'The Sublime is Now' reads in parts like a revolutionary manifesto; a call to arms declaring difference and distance from the European landscape and the moribund tradition of the sublime found therein. Such history, Newman makes clear, has ensured that the category of the sublime has become irretrievably entangled with ideal form. Beauty, he maintains, has lingered beneath the surface of the sublime. Newman argues that despite the modern will to 'destroy the established rhetoric of beauty' early efforts amounted to little more than a 'transfer of values', rather than a lasting recalibration of 'experiencing life'. The impressionist 'insistence on a surface of ugly strokes' ultimately equated to a continuation of a value system that could or would not

slip the shackles of the 'culture values of their plastic history'. This system's bottom line remained beauty. In short, for Newman, elevation of means and (low) materials, like Dada's use of sandpaper or newspaper, was merely misdirection. One that failed to address the experiential core of the sublime as it developed in the modern age.

However, there are clues in Newman's text that would suggest that the rupture was merely a surface tear, and that he was far from 'free from the weight of European culture'. Unlikely though it seems on face value, it is possible that his conception of the sublime as an experiential, subjective encounter with painting, devoid of association and the figure, turned on a very continental perspective on interiority. Newman's notion of secularized elevation was potentially informed by the anti-hierarchical, anti-institutional cultural agenda espoused in the writing of George Bataille and the dissident surrealists that contributed to the *Documents* magazine project.

Founded in 1929 by Bataille and Pierre d'Espezel with financial backing from Georges Wildenstein, *Documents* served as platform for Bataille's 'paradoxical philosophy' during the inter-war years. This philosophy was based on his belief that 'thought was incapable, *by its very nature*, of illuminating the essential areas of human existence'.²⁰ Such a philosophy promoted the tearing down of the aesthetic institution and the tyranny of critical language — a language that had propped up the western visual culture that Newman's *Two Edges* stood in opposition to. *Documents*, writes Alastair Brotchie

attempted a de-coding of European culture on a par with the emerging disciplines devoted to understanding "primitive" social structures. No distinction was made between high and low culture; only their usefulness to understanding was significant [...] The very name of the magazine implied an examination of the given: not art but *evidence*; not literary writing but *documents*.²¹

A kindred spirit can be discerned in *The Tiger's Eye* editorial determination to eschew conventional critical apparatus. Its 'direct approach' aimed at eliminating the distractions of 'historic or analytic process' by presenting work without identifying the artist responsible for it.²² Form within the magazine, determined by contrasting formats, typefaces and visual juxtapositions, privileged direct experience and resisted conventional critical interpretation. The magazine's format was 'intimate, encouraging the reader to hold the volume in both hands as if closing a circuit'.²³

Within *Documents* Bataille, along with key contributors like the German avant-garde novelist Carl Einstein and critic Michel Leiris, established the *Critical Dictionary*. A magazine within a magazine, the *Dictionary* was a critique of definition and, as such, questioned the limits of language itself. 'Words,' states Carl Einstein, 'are petrifications which elicit mechanical reactions in us'.²⁴ Barnett Newman points out that the turn to the visual in the languages of modern painting and prose has been a drive away from such petrifications — away from the 'confusing dichotomy of meaning inherent in their media'. He credits James Joyce as giving the surrealists their 'language'. 'It was James Joyce', writes Newman, 'who taught the surrealists how to use words as if they were clay that could be molded and shaped to produce a plastic form'.²⁵ Plastic form in this sense comes close to the insistence on the function of words as espoused by Bataille et al. Newman qualifies modern painting in terms redolent of *Documents* when he writes that its development was derived from a 'concern with — or more correctly, a return to — its primitive function, that is, its original function as a vehicle of human expression'.²⁶ That the broad church of surrealism was in the background for Newman is made clear when he states 'To me Burke reads like a surrealist manual'.²⁷ His familiarity with the movement and his forthright opinions on it are further evidenced in strident comments that reveal his view that surrealism had failed to shake off traditional perspective and 'high realism'.²⁸ Newman was at pains to distance the American 'new painter' from the threat of being assimilated into what he perceived as a polluted landscape of surrealism.

However, just several pages after the image of Newman's *Two Edges*, The Sublime Issue of *The Tiger's Eye* featured a written piece entitled '*The Torture*' (elsewhere translated as '*The Torment*') by 'one of the foremost of the French contemporary philosophers', George Bataille.²⁹ The extended extract used in the magazine is taken from 'L'Experience Interieure', Bataille's exploration of and meditation on 'a strange world where anguish and ecstasy coexist'.³⁰ While not directly addressing the sublime, Bataille's writing nevertheless muses laterally on God, knowledge and 'the extreme limit (l'extreme) of the possible'. At this threshold or point of transgression begins what he terms a 'singular experience' whose 'tradition is difficult; the introduction of its oral form is really only barely written'.³¹ The singular encounter, sublime in sensation if not in name, found in 'tangible experience and not by logical explanation' is a downward looking absolute — an absolute zero that marks the point at which obligation to express is abandoned by method. 'When nothing is possible any longer is in my eyes to have an experience of the divine', writes Bataille, 'it is analogous to a torment'.³²

Written in 1943, several years after the demise of the *Documents* project, Bataille's atheological treatise, *L'Experience Interieure* (Inner Experience), resonates 'with the absence of God' and locates transcendence in the negative, in the back and forth of limit transgressed.³³ For Bataille, *Now* is a point of collapse that provokes a 'dramatic loss of self'.³⁴ This collapse is kinetic; it is a downward movement or 'fall' — a leveling force that relates to his theory of *informe*, articulated in his brief categorization of *formless* in the *Critical Dictionary*. Though obliquely, in the 'Sublime is Now' Newman brings Bataille's *informe* to mind when he contrasts Greek idealism with the Gothic or the baroque, where 'the sublime consists of a desire to destroy form, where form can be formless'. Whilst Newman's use of the term *formless* might only circumstantially invoke Bataille's conception, there remains a sense that Bataille is in the shadows when Newman calls for a break with the 'rhetoric of exaltation' and aligns the sublime with the impulse of modern art to 'destroy beauty'.³⁵ Engaged in a 'struggle' with beauty as idealized form the sublime that Newman portrays is antagonistic, demanding disassociation from the subsequent 'confusion in philosophy' that defines its past.

The contents of Newman's library at the time of his death fail to reveal any of Bataille's writing. However, as Richard Schiff points out, during Newman's early career he was unable to afford an extensive book collection.³⁶ Much of his reading was likely facilitated by libraries and with borrowed texts. In view of this and the evident relationship between Bataille and *The Tiger's Eye* it remains conceivable that the painter was intimately familiar with his notion of the leaking of the sacred into the profane.³⁷

In 1948 Newman produced an essay for the third issue of *The Tiger's Eye* entitled 'The New Sense of Fate'. Ultimately unpublished due to its length, it considers the cultural and social fallout of the catastrophe of World War II. In it, and the subsequently published condensed version, 'The Object and the Image', Newman draws parallels with 'attempts made in previous eras to grapple with overwhelming experience through the media or art'.³⁸ This he does by framing the plight of the modern painter with that of the ancient artist. He writes

After more than two thousand years we have finally arrived at the tragic position of the Greeks, and we have achieved this Greek state of tragedy because we have at last ourselves invented a new sense of all-pervading fate, a fate that is for the first time for modern man as real and as intimate as the Greeks' fate was to them [...] Each of us now stand like Oedipus and can by his acts or lack of action, in innocence, kill his father and desecrate his mother.³⁹

Such bleak, near Nietzschean rhetoric reinforces the notion of a potential proximity between Newman and Bataille, who a decade prior to Newman's characterization of *a new sense of fate* defined by trauma, included a section on The 'Tragic Time of Greece' in a paper entitled *Obelisk*, published in *Mesures* (April 15, 1938). Musing on war and Nietzsche's prophecy of the Death of God, Bataille invokes tragic and violent myth to negotiate the modern condition — citing Cronus, whose strength was engendered by the 'bloody mutilation of his father' and Dionysus, 'whose coming into the world depended

on the murder of his mother by his father'.⁴⁰ 'Going in the opposite direction on the road travelled by the ancient world,' writes Bataille, 'this world, as its riches accumulate and everything in it decomposes, aspires in its depths to the tragic deliverances of primitive Greek naiveté'. Echoing this sentiment Newman describes the modern American artist as a 'barbarian' — a primitive confronted with the opportunity to be free of the 'paraphernalia' of language and idealized form and to 'come closer to the sources of the tragic emotion'. 'Shall we not, as artists,' asks Newman, 'search out the new objects for its image?'⁴¹ It can be argued that Bataille pre-empts Newman's question when he states in broader terms that

The movement of all life now places the human being before the alternatives of either this conquest or a disastrous retreat. The human being arrives at the threshold: there he must throw himself headlong into that which has no foundation and no head.⁴²

This threshold gives way to the 'vertiginous fall'. For Bataille it is arrived at by guillotine, for Newman by the *zip*.

Bataille's writing on *The Obelisk* offers further evidence of parallel concerns and themes in Newman's work. The image of the obelisk itself is a key example. In 1967 Newman turned to the Egyptian form with his sculpture, *Broken Obelisk* (Figure. 5). In this work he fuses two ancient forms, central to Bataille's text, into a kind of modern formlessness. Created in industrial corten steel the inverted obelisk balances implausibly on the apex of a pyramid. Newman calls into question the permanence and stability of these signs that Bataille states 'transcend the intolerable void that time opens under men's feet'.⁴³ Idealized form is literally turned on its head, hierarchies are leveled — 'the high places themselves topple, to ensure a total revelation'.⁴⁴ Newman presents the 'paraphernalia' of the ancients broken and upended — he presents such a language in ruin. The nostalgia inherent in their form is subverted, renewing a plastic language for tragic content.

Image available at www.moma.org/collection

Figure. 5 Barnett Newman, *Broken Obelisk*, 1963-9, MOMA
(Cor-ten steel, 749.9 x 318.8 x 318.8 cm)

In measuring the force and resonance of these ancient icons Bataille considers what he terms the 'sensation of time' in the face of a collapse of 'imperishable unity'. Here 'The lands stray from their sun, the horizon is annihilated'.⁴⁵ This 'state of glory' writes Bataille, 'is thus deftly linked to the feeling of an endless fall'.⁴⁶ Such a fall equates to experience made concrete once image as such fails. This fall, this *sensation of time* is also to be found at the heart of Newman's view of the sublime experienced in painting. Commenting on his experience of the Indian earth mounds of Ohio in 1949, Newman writes

the Egyptian pyramid by comparison is nothing but an ornament [...] Suddenly one realizes that the sensation is not one of space or [of] an object in space [...] The sensation is the sensation of time — and all the other multiple feelings vanish like the outside landscape [...] I insist on my experiences of sensations in time — not in the *sense* of time but the physical *sensation* of time.⁴⁷

Reflecting on *Broken Obelisk* through the prism of Bataille's writing potentially recalibrates the perspective on Newman's painting and his conception of the sublime. Under these terms Newman's *Now* becomes an existential matter. After 'all the other multiple feelings vanish like the outside landscape' it is *inner experience* that is left behind. The vertical visual gestures of *Two Edges* that would develop into the *zip* of *Onement I* destabilize established aesthetic structures. Like Bataille's conception of *formless*, Newman's *zip* is an operative phrase that orientates to the experiential. It too functions as a term serving to declassify traditional critical formulations — a 'term that serves to bring things down in the world'.⁴⁸ We are reminded that Bataille's states in his brief oblique text for *formless* in the Critical Dictionary that 'A dictionary beings when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks'. For Newman a painting begins when it no longer gives the meaning of image, but its task — that of giving 'man a sense of place: that he knows he's there, so he's aware of himself'. Such subjectivity is an isolating, negative experience. Recalling an incident that occurred at his first solo show at the Betty Parsons Gallery in 1950, Newman recounts an acquaintance furiously confronting him, distraught

and in tears protesting ‘You called me names, you made me aware of myself’.⁴⁹ Newman’s *zip* is a threshold and as such is ‘a thing of dread, because there one must manifest or cast aside one’s qualities, because there it is necessary to register, forcibly or with levity, the rank one occupies in society’.⁵⁰ Like the Critical Dictionary the *zip* marks the limit of language.

Painting: Limit and Language

Carl Einstein’s contribution to the *Documents* project and his wider influence, before his eventual suicide in 1940, has recently been re-evaluated by commentators like Rainer Rumold and Georges Didi-Huberman. After Bataille and Leiris, Einstein signed the most articles in the magazine’s two-year run. At the core of the aesthetic theory that he developed during the inter-war period was ‘the notion of contemporary painting as “a language”’.⁵¹ Framed within the context of the *kulturkampf* of modernism that purged language of representation and narrative from artistic modes, Einstein’s theory aimed at overturning established hierarchies to achieve a democratization of form — an aim that also characterized *Documents*’ critical drive during its short life span.

Focused largely on the cubist painting of the period, particularly that of Pablo Picasso and Andre Masson, Einstein’s conception of painting as language was based on a rejection of the autonomy of literature. This ‘turn to the visual’ aimed at a paradigm shift away from the privileged position of the written word and the inescapable systems, polemics and ‘metaphors’ — the memory — that came with it. In opposition to Breton’s mainstream surrealism, where the sovereignty of the word remained, the dissident surrealists of *Documents* believed that conventional language had become compromised and infested with cliché, symbol and sign that obstructed pure aesthetic experience. Literature had ceased to be an effective structure for the interrogation or deconstruction of the *real* — the real being that which is necessarily beyond the *object* and, therefore, objective description. For Einstein ‘literature as an institution had turned into stereotype and exclusion, any linguistic text being,

to begin with, always a narrow translation of sensorial perceptions into a “completely other sphere”.⁵²

Words had failed to realize their promise. Corrupted as they were with stagnating critical and theoretical association *Documents* articulated the view that conventional language could only realize secondary, proxy-images for experience passed. It was simply not up to the job of mediating the duality between object and subject. As Einstein comments, ‘Nightingale’ stands in for love and longing, the ‘stars’ for the ‘the Absolute’. At best words offer material experience ‘paraphrased’.⁵³ Devalued by sentimentality for defunct metaphysics, words were unable to shake off memory, affiliation and attendant, distracting meaning. Einstein continues

The nightingale is almost always a cliché, a narcotic, a form of laziness and ignorance. Indeed, what we designate with the help of words is less an object than a vague opinion; one uses words as though they were ornament of one’s own person. Words are usually petrifications that trigger mechanical reactions in us. They are instruments of power suggested by the cunning or by drunks. The nightingale falls into the category of paraphrases of the absolute; it is the grand master of all the techniques of classic seduction in which one resorts to the charm of smallness.⁵⁴

In the wake of the moral and artistic crisis that defined the first half of the twentieth century, painting too had suffered a certain petrification. Global conflict had exposed society to the *extreme limit* of experience. ‘We now know the terror to expect’, writes Newman, ‘Hiroshima showed it to us. We are no longer, then, in the face of mystery’.⁵⁵ Such experience leaves culture with the obligation to articulate it but without the language to do so. At this point of impasse one is left with silence. But that silence is particular.

The weight of this silence drags the sublime from the heavens and crushes it beyond recognition. As Adorno suggests, the extreme violence of Auschwitz and the continued turbulent history of the late twentieth century inverted the internal compass of the concept. Lyotard argues that literature, the ‘cognitive

regimen' of history's narrative and its associative language, reaches its limits and fails in the face of catastrophic events.⁵⁶ Unable to absorb or assimilate categories and 'phrases' associated with trauma on the scale of the holocaust, Lyotard states that the silence imposed equates to an 'instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be'.⁵⁷ Where traditional structures of language cannot sustain cognitive process, the direct, unmediated language of painting takes over.

Newman's *Two Edges* is the silence after Auschwitz and Hiroshima — a silence that remains articulate. It does not paraphrase, allude to, or narratively recount history — as Ray points out, Newman's *Now* is not an 'acting-out' or 'working-through' of collective trauma.⁵⁸ Rather the silence or 'negative phrase', as Lyotard conceives of it, embodied in *Two Edges* refers the viewer only to the material fact of experience. As Lyotard comments in his essay 'Newman: The Instant', 'the message is presentation, but it presents nothing; it is, that is, presence'.⁵⁹

Newman's 'nothing' is without visual association or literary allusion, but it is far from empty. As presentation it seeks nothing more than to elicit the direct 'physical *sensation* of time'.⁶⁰ This is not to be confused with duration, which, Newman argues has been the underlying subject matter of painting, and carries nostalgia or high drama and consequently remains associative and historical. Instead Newman is concerned with the present tense — or the tension of presence.

As the engine of the modern and postmodern avant-garde the *negative phrase*, without nostalgia, divorced from its original (traumatic) object, speaks of presentation itself, of subject. This phenomenological language is, in Lyotard's opinion, encountered by the 'common person' rather than the scholar, or as *The Tiger's Eye* would have it, by the many rather than just the rhetorical thinker. Such experience is 'aroused by the negative presentation of the indeterminate'.⁶¹

Lyotard makes it clear that if 'there is any 'subject-matter', it is immediacy. It happens here and now'.⁶² The silence of Newman's *Two Edges* is deafening. Lyotard continues:

I (the viewer) am no more than an ear open to the sound, which comes from out of the silence; the painting is that sound, an accord. Arising [*se dresser*], which is a constant theme in Newman, must be understood in the sense of pricking up one's ears [*dresser son Oreille*], of listening.⁶³

For Lyotard Newman's *sound* — his material language — embodies the event that occurs despite chaos and the 'threatening void'.⁶⁴ The (sublime) threat that 'language or life will soon be extinguished' is mitigated in Newman's presentation of the creative act — in the unity of the pictorial plane sheared vertically.⁶⁵ The privileged position of the written word is challenged by *Two Edges*, by what Newman insists is a direct visual experience 'whose reality is self-evident'.⁶⁶

Lyotard draws our attention to a tension between 'writing' or literature and painting in relation to the sublime by reflecting upon Edmund Burke's hierarchical structuring of the concept. Here literature supersedes painting in its facility to conjure an 'infinite number of associations' for the sublime sensations of terror and delight. Painting, on the other hand, Burke maintains, fails the sublime because of the persistent constraints of figurative representation. Lyotard suggests that Newman escapes these constraints through

[...] chromatic matter alone, and it's relationship with the material (the canvas, which is sometimes left unprimed) and the lay-out (scale, format, proportions), which must inspire the wonderful surprise, the wonder that there should be something rather than nothing.⁶⁷

In 1948 it is literature that is constrained by association, it is the written word that is unable to break free of figurative representation, of representing the figure at the center of cataclysmic history. Newman's abstract painting

accommodates the 'unheard-of phrase' in its articulation of imperative gesture. Such an act testifies to being. Despite the threat of nothing, despite teetering on the edge of the abyss 'the zip, takes place, divides the shadows, breaks down the light into colors like a prism, and arranges them across the surface like a universe'.⁶⁸ *Two Edges* embodies the sublime at tension, as polarities reverse from representing romantic proof positive of sublime experience in vistas of vast and violent nature to the negative — to the presentation of that which cannot be represented.

Two Edges, a sign of the extreme reduction to come in Newman's painting, is material articulation of that 'new tragedy that is playing itself out on a Greek-like stage under a new sense of fate that we have ourselves created'.⁶⁹ Newman argues that the artist's response cannot 'play with an art of over refinement, an art of quality, of sensibility, of beauty' — rather, a more violent approach was required to 'tear the tragedy to shreds'.⁷⁰ From this historical perspective, Newman's *Now* is bound to human dignity corroded, with nobility and the 'myth of progress' corrupted not by the arbitrary, yet ultimately rational forces of (previously divine) nature, but instead by an irrational evil intuited by mankind, one that insists on a re-evaluation of language itself.

For Carl Einstein such a re-evaluation provoked the turn to the visual. Painting, he argued, facilitated the liberation from 'cults' of the past, from 'immortalized dead turkeys' and the 'convention of the spine' — the historical and critical narrative whose language, overburdened with memory, spawned what he termed 'mnemonic images'.⁷¹ Newman's rhetoric runs parallel. For him it was the 'obsolete props of an outmoded and antiquated legend' that were the obstacles to a renewed relationship with 'absolute emotions'.⁷² Where Einstein declares that 'Artists no longer work from an image of the gods but from their own conceptions',⁷³ Newman states 'Instead of making cathedrals out of Christ, man, or 'life', we are making them out of ourselves, out of our own feelings'.⁷⁴

Newman's *Now*, conceived of as the immediacy of a concrete physical experience has proximity with the real experienced absolutely as articulated

by Einstein. It seems plausible that when Newman writes, 'The image we produce is the self-evident one of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history' he is doing so with Einstein and Bataille's conception of an earth bound, 'concretized absolute' in mind.⁷⁵ 'This absolute', writes Einstein, 'confined as it is within the limits of an experience, is simply a marker of the intensity of human self-assertion'.⁷⁶

The term 'a marker of the intensity of human self-assertion' might justifiably be applied to the gesture of the *zip* in Newman's painting. Einstein's rhetoric would seem in part to have resonance to Newman's determination, through his painting, that 'Man' — not God — 'Is Present', and that 'pure visual function' instills in the viewer an awareness of self, even if that self is temporarily lost to the chaos experienced beyond limits of cognition. Whilst the *intensity of human self-assertion* might be disassociated from the metaphysical as a religious, ideological generality, nevertheless, it has specificity in terms of a secularized notion of transcendence — an experience of an unknowable *other* grounded in the immediacy or physicality of presence. In conversation with the noted European critic and writer David Sylvester, himself a contributor to the sublime issue of *The Tiger's Eye*, Newman states 'One thing that I am involved in about painting is that the painting should give a man a sense of place'.⁷⁷ Place is used in opposition to space, which Newman associates with renaissance perspective. Newman describes this place, this here, this *Now*, as 'metaphysical fact' — an apparently contradictory phrase that exposes the problematic of categorizing an experience of the unverifiable and reveals the conflict between the idea and its embodiment.

Newman was acutely aware of the schism between concept and conception, of the absurdity of trying to reconcile subject and object, theory and practice, of the distance between the text for 'The Sublime is Now' and the texture of *Two Edges*. He highlights the inherent contradiction of seeking to categorize the un-categorizable when he comments 'What I'm saying is that my painting is physical and what I'm saying also is that my painting is metaphysical [...]

the attempt to describe something that is alive is impossible'.⁷⁸ Within the pages of *Documents* we find this tortuous, contradictory state explored in the abstraction of the *Critical Dictionary*. As Robert Label remarks

A dictionary's sole purpose is the imposition of form and homology, definition fixes objects in thought, extracts them from the world and pins them to a page. A dictionary is never critical, any element of subjectivity would allow in the formless, that heterological gob of spittle. Formless declassifies and is the negation of definition.⁷⁹

It is this *heterological gob of spittle* that lubricated the liberation of language from *ancestor cults*. The process was far from genteel. The movement from the language of image to the vocabulary of surface was determined through and by a 'dialectic of destruction, or, better, decomposition'.⁸⁰ New forms could only be generated as a result of violent operation that amounted to the 'assassination of other versions'.⁸¹ Commenting on the painting of George Braque, Einstein declares 'tableau = coupure' (Picture = rupture). Qualifying this edict, George Didi-Huberman comments

The cubist picture is 'rupture', which is why, after the death of God, it was able to reinvent the power of *beholding* in its spectator — the opposite of the come-on — as it withdrew from every form of familiarity; thus it could reinvent and secularize the *aura*.⁸²

A transgressive, transformative force, rupture can be said to characterize Einstein's notion of the operative violence driving cubism and subsequently modern painting in general. It is the means and method of critical, historical and pictorial dissociation. As Didi-Huberman notes, cubist painting presents rupture optically. Such tactics decompose visual cohesion, perspective and object. As plane ruptures from plane, forming 'tectonic dissociations', it is surface that subsequently defines image. No longer read narratively, image is isolated from burdensome cultural and historical association. Divorced from literature, metaphor, illustration and representation, it is instead subjectivity experienced directly and materially that is privileged. As objects rupture, new

un-imagined, prototype forms are revealed across a psycho-active surface and articulated through the act and action of painting; in processing the objective world, not in terms of visual representation, but rather in terms of representing as visual experience the sensation of the unconscious and the *real*.

Einstein equated the expressive facility of painting and the 'murderous force' of its processes — 'vis-à-vis the pulverized 'identity of object' — with the spontaneity and fluidity of speaking.⁸³ He cites André Masson's expressive, automatic painted images being as the most 'advanced visual language'.⁸⁴ Einstein's conception of painting as a language centered on what he saw as its capacity to de-familiarize form. His term 'verformen' is closely bound to broader conceptions of the informe, which, as developed by Bataille in *Documents*, 'desublimates and reveals, and thus lays bare, the material, physiological base of imaginary formal processes as open'.⁸⁵

Newman's *Two Edges* might then be approached in relation to the language of the informe. The informe image is one in flux. It is not statement of fact, relating to the nature of objects, but rather the fact of stating seeing as subjective process. Such subjectivity, post representation, drives painting towards a reduced base state — towards the physical immediacy of gesture, mark, and the material relationship between support and medium. Through the prism of the informe painting becomes an open proposition — a form of material discourse. By virtue of its isolation from memory and cliché, or because of its capacity to destroy them, mid-century avant-garde painting, driven by the informe, serves as vehicle for critique. Such production, Didi-Huberman categorizes as a 'dialectical image', one that corrodes traditional aesthetic experience through material insistence.⁸⁶ Under these terms the painted surface, autonomous and irrational, becomes theoretical — it becomes an ontological statement on the limits of vision. With the objective world ruptured, seeing is made 'conscious'. The spectator is left with a language of 'verformen' — of disruption, transgression and sabotage — severed (all be it temporarily) from logic and the written word. Without the scaffold of simile and reference the 'I' is unable to orientate. The compass

needle snaps and 'self' is lost, abandoned. The limits of cognition are exposed in prototype forms. Interpretive systems are superseded by visual gesture processed purely experientially — but nonetheless concretely.

Einstein uses the term 'concrete' to strip the absolute of mysticism and the divine. He makes his case explicitly:

This painting of the absolute, this grasping of the pure visual function, demonstrated that the absolute is not some ideological generality, but always a perfectly concrete individual experience that has nothing to do with any metaphysical or posthumously retrospective theoretical product. As function, the absolute is thoroughly un-metaphysical and un-transcendent. The experience of the absolute can be represented as fully or as inadequately as any other experience, once the artist, instead of representing lazy, run-down metaphorical objects, turns to inventing freely the forms appropriate to this function.⁸⁷

Where *Documents* insisted that words reveal task rather than meaning, so too painting must resist description and reveal only function — that being experience of the real manifest through the tactility of 'hallucinations of pure act'.⁸⁸ Einstein positions painting as conduit for an absolute of material immediacy, and in so doing provokes the shift from discourse *on* the sublime, to discourse *of* the sublime; from the language of critical interpretation, historical narrative and aesthetic gymnastics to the language of the painted surface — primary, experiential and *true*. Einstein's dissolute absolute was painting as the spontaneous expression of forms devolved to *formlessness*, direct and sensational, with process made visible through visual gesture, through ruptured perspective, material presence and the artist's mark. Irrespective of aspiration, of final destination, of image, Newman's language of painting conjures an absolute determined by textured form, by raw materials — by smeared paint bleeding through masking tape (Figure. 7A)



Figure. 7A Barnett Newman, *End of Silence* — detail, 1949
(Oil on canvas, 96 x 76 cm)

courtesy of Barnett Newman Foundation

Discourse and Discord: The Sublime Beyond Now

The question that now arises is how, if we are living in a time without legend or mythos that can be called sublime, if we refuse to admit any exaltation in pure relations, if we refuse to live in the abstract, how can we be creating a sublime art? ⁸⁹

Newman's question remains pertinent. Despite establishing a genealogy that includes a broad range of artists whose work developed from the 'negative possibilities of specific historical images and materials', from the post-war to the contemporary period, Gene Ray's account of a sublime transfigured by the trauma of cataclysmic events surprisingly omits a perspective on the attack on the World Trade Center on 11th September 2001, an event which once more exposes the limits of language, imagination and cognition. ⁹⁰ The early years of the twenty-first century have produced a steady increase in the cultural and critical currency of the sublime. ⁹¹ As Christine Battersby suggests in her book, *The Sublime: Terror and Human Indifference*, as a transformative event — an event that has operative potential, politically and culturally — 9/11 has been made to 'function as the equivalent to the sublime'. ⁹²

Like the Lisbon Earthquake or the devastating history of both World Wars the collective trauma produced by the events of 9/11 cannot be assimilated through established interpretive frameworks. Subject and object are once more disassociated. Concept cannot be attached to that which proves inconceivable. Once again an irruption in the 'grand narratives of legitimation that characterize modernity in the West' produces a schism between past and future. ⁹³ Arguably the 'spirit' of the contemporary age, terror has never had such traction in the collective consciousness. Oscillating between the known and the unknown, terror is the abstraction that resurrects the sublime. Against it we wage an unwinnable, unpresentable, perpetual and infinite war.

As was the case for Newman and post-war painters on both side of the Atlantic such moral and cultural crisis precipitates an inward turn. At this turning point the individual and the social are set at tension. The articulate

silence of Newman's *Two Edges*, if not overtly political, alludes to a proto-Kantian moral dimension to sublime experience. When Newman was asked at a gathering that included Harold Rosenberg, Robert Motherwell and David Hare what *Two Edges* meant 'in terms of society, in terms of the world, in terms of the situation' Newman responded as follows

If my work were properly understood, it would be the end of state capitalism and totalitarianism. Because to the extent that my painting was not an arrangement of objects, not an arrangement of spaces, not an arrangement of graphic elements, was an open painting, in the sense that it represented an open world, to that extent I thought, and I still believe, that my work in terms of its social impact does denote the possibility of an open society, of an open world, not of a closed institutional world.⁹⁴

'A closed institutional world' well describes Newman's view of the European academic cultural landscape, based, as it was, on 'objective rhetoric' as opposed to the subjective revelation painting potentially provokes. *Two Edges* marks a break away from what Newman perceived as the tyranny of language — with the unavoidable historical, associative narrative that accompanied the western formulation of the sublime. Newman comments that

So strong is the grip of the rhetoric of exaltation as an attitude in the large context of the European culture pattern that the elements of sublimity in the revolution we know as modern art, exist in its efforts and energy to escape the pattern rather than the realization of a new experience.⁹⁵

Newman presents forms that are direct in their communication of an experience of the new and the now, unmediated by or unfettered with the straining historical formulation of the sublime. *Two Edges*, or perhaps more aptly his later painting *End of Silence* (1949) (Figure. 6) — a heavier, more aggressively textured and painterly variation on *Onement I* — arguably breaks



Figure. 6 Barnett Newman, *End of Silence*, 1949
(Oil on canvas, 96 x 76 cm)

courtesy of Barnett Newman Foundation

the 'grip of the rhetoric of exaltation'. It de-limits traditional pictorial language and transcends the failings of rhetoric unable to articulate the concept post-Hiroshima/Auschwitz.

The current resurrection of the sublime has revealed a concept once again in crisis. Like Frankenstein's monster the postmodern, contemporary sublime is an assemblage of decomposing parts from increasingly complex aesthetic rhetoric and bears only passing resemblance to the concept of old. Lacking the coherence of a theologically orientated pre-modern sublime, the splintering of cultural production that has characterized a disparate post-modern landscape has subsequently been reflected in the fracturing of the concept in a contemporary context.

Jane Forsey argues that the groundswell of interest in the sublime over the course of a tumultuous last decade well suited to notions of the inexplicable, overwhelming and the horrendous has resulted in such confusion that a theory of the sublime is simply not possible.⁹⁶ Such pessimism in relation to a concept notoriously difficult to capture is shared by James Elkins who argues that it is consequently only effective in relation to a narrow range of artworks, explicitly Romantic, produced during the nineteenth century. Its use value in a contemporary context has been compromised by writers determined to 'smuggle covert religious meaning into texts that are putatively secular' — the resulting postmodern sublime, Elkins suggests, is so intricate as to be redundant without extensive qualification.⁹⁷

Both Guy Sircello and Forsey agree that such confusion comes largely from the intrinsic 'problem of the sublime' — that is the irreconcilable difficulties of the spiritual, post-God, formulated around cognitive failure derived from epistemological or ontological transcendence. Orientated towards the possibility of such experience articulated via an object that is necessarily unknowable, that is epistemologically inaccessible, Guy Sircello argues that such theorizing quickly becomes unstable, falling into incoherence and contradiction. He likens the problem to the impossibility of having a visual experience of an invisible object. As Forsey points out, the inherent

contradiction is that the 'sublime object is both transcendent and familiar'.⁹⁸ The concept is cannibalistic. Forsey argues that epistemological transcendence — that is movement beyond limits of knowledge — depends on, but fails because of, its proximity to ontological transcendence. The confrontation with that which exceeds the boundaries of cognition, that presents itself as unknowable, is an experience that demands object and environment but ultimately accedes that no such concrete manifestation, no such presentation, nor presence can articulate or represent such experience. Being cannot be reconciled with the unknown in relation to the overwhelming. The postmodern sublime eats itself.

Where Sircello ultimately remains optimistic, viewing the concept as critically injured at worst, Forsey and Elkins argue that it is in its death throes. Forsey takes issue with Sircello's thesis for a 'wholly epistemological account of the sublime' — an account that necessarily supposes Immanuel Kant was wrong to link cognitive failure with moral transcendence. She points out that without the moment of moral reckoning that comes in the final (in her view positive) movement of the mind, the field of contemporary sublime is left open to 'any encounters that likewise humble us or draw attention to our vulnerability' — from the New York Times crossword puzzle to the rush hour cycle ride home.⁹⁹ In this respect, we might also include the inadequacy experienced in the face of the apparently infinite, irreconcilable complexities and contradictions of sublime theory. Forsey implies that if anything can be sublime, then nothing is.

Sircello recognizes that the sublime has an intimate relationship with *nothing*. In his efforts to move beyond the perceived impasse of contradiction and incoherence within the concept he addresses what he calls the 'intuition of nothingness', and draws attention to the fact that despite the 'revelatory force' ascribed to the concept, sublime discourse 'often indicates, in a variety of ways, that there is *nothing there* to be revealed'.¹⁰⁰ The *Now* beyond the *zip* is empty. That is not to say that the use value of such an experience is zero. That is not to say that it has nothing to offer, but rather that it offers the 'great nothing'.¹⁰¹ An endless emptiness, but one filled with eternal possibilities.

The post-9/11 sublime continues a downward trajectory initiated under modernism. This will to the negative is governed by a certain sense of absence — an absence that returns us to the writing of George Bataille. Referring to his theory of ‘inner experience’, Sircello locates absence in Bataille’s particular conception of *nothingness* found in the inadequacy of non-knowledge. Here the *possibility* of nothing is glimpsed through the cracks of failure. Bataille writes, ‘But I cry out to the sky: “I know nothing.” And I repeat in a *comical* voice (I cry out to the sky, at times, in this way): “Absolutely nothing”’.¹⁰²

While acknowledging that ‘Bataille’s historical connection with the early modern tradition of the sublime is neither explicit nor direct’ Sircello sees proximity and relevance in his theory of subjective, reflective experience.¹⁰³ ‘Experience’ that Bataille states ‘attains in the end the fusion of the object and the subject, being as subject non-knowledge, as object the unknown.’¹⁰⁴ In developing his case for epistemological transcendence Sircello quotes Bataille as follows

I hold the apprehension of God — be he without form and without mode [...] to be an obstacle in the movement which carries us to the more obscure apprehension of the unknown; of a presence which is no longer in any way distinct from an absence.¹⁰⁵

Bataille locates the (deconsecrated) sacred in this in-between state — in a sense of the abject. Like Bataille, Sircello marks the distinction between experience and its rhetoric. Nothing or ‘non-knowledge’ reveals the limits of theoretical discourse and its language and returns us to the experience itself — to feelings invoked.

For Forsey attending only to sublime experience itself leaves the possibility of a coherent theory further off than ever. Feelings, she argues, intentional or otherwise, have little to do with cognition and its limits. She insists that expressive ‘poetic language’, used to communicate ‘a feeling the author has

or has had', is restricted to written accounts or evocations of experience by definition secondary to or proxy for the reality they attempt to capture.¹⁰⁶ To rely on such amounts to a rejection of the traditions of the concept's discourse. If we are left with nothing but poetic expressions of a certain category of experience then a historically grounded, coherent theory is no longer possible. Consequently, as consensus would have it, aesthetic logic has been exhausted. The sublime has arrived at a kind of rhetorical ground zero; overburdened with association and nostalgia, the language of the limitless has reached its limit.

How then might we transcend this limit? Any worthwhile continued discourse demands consideration of alternative modes of articulation. Forsey's disparaging view of 'poetic language' in relation to the sublime fails to take into account the theoretical potential or relevance of non-verbal language, like that of painting, in relation to the unknowable, overwhelming or cognitively inaccessible. An encounter with the sensation of anxiety attributed to the collapse of reason or self is not contingent on a familiarity with 'medieval definitions' and the historic complexities of aesthetic logic.¹⁰⁷ Sircello suggests that the breaking up of established rhetorical hierarchies is essential to the contemporary revitalization of the category of the sublime. This anti-institutional perspective brings us, via Bataille, full circle to Newman's contribution to the sublime issue of *The Tiger's Eye*.

Newman's text 'The Sublime is Now' and his painting *Two Edges* represent the distinction of categories or discourse within the sublime as determined by Sircello and, to a greater extent, Peter De Bolla. Like De Bolla, Sircello separates 'language that is or purports to be more or less immediately descriptive or expressive of sublime experience, i.e. discourse that proceeds or is represented as proceeding more or less directly from such experience' from 'talk about the sublime', or the language of analytical discourse that includes not only reflection on, and therefore distance from, sublime experience but also 'other talk about the sublime'. Such chatter might be described as the institution of sublime rhetoric from Longinus to Lyotard and beyond — what De Bolla distinguishes as discourse *on* the sublime.

Despite his rejection of the impediments of memory, association and exaltation, Newman's text ultimately contributes to *talk* about the sublime. *Two Edges*, on the other hand contributes to a material discourse *of* the sublime. This, De Bolla states, consists of poetic language in the broadest terms that produces sublime effects and conjures the experience directly. Drawing on these distinctions James Elkins qualifies the discourse *on* the sublime as being located 'out there, in the world', whereas the discourse *of* the sublime is located in 'the interior mind' and requires no further validation other than the experience itself.¹⁰⁸ It is to this discourse that Newman's painting contributes. There is no distance, no mediation between experience and direct interpretation, or reception. *Now*, it transpires, is the discourse *of* the sublime found in the extreme reduction of painting as abjection. Here the umbilical chord of aesthetic language is severed by the immediacy of a subjective encounter. This moment is terrifying in its autonomy. 'It is neither seductive nor equivocal', writes Lyotard, 'it is clear, 'direct' and 'poor'.¹⁰⁹ For Lyotard, Newman's zip is an instant manifest in visual gesture — gesture that testifies to event alone. The discourse to which it contributes is operative, not referential. The zip, comments Lyotard, 'accomplishes an ontological task, that is, a 'chronological task'. It accomplishes it without completing it'.¹¹⁰ Newman's gesture leaves experience open — the instant is fleeting. In terms that bring Bataille back to mind, Lyotard equates the experience with a 'search for *apparition* itself'.¹¹¹

Writing on the sacred, Bataille draws on the Sufi conception of this moment as a 'slicing sword' that 'cuts the roots of the future and the past'.¹¹² This 'privileged instant'

flees as soon as it is seen and cannot be grasped [...] This gives rise to a mixture of unhappiness and exultation, of disgust and insolence; nothing seems more miserable and more dead than the stabilized thing, nothing seems more desirable than what will soon disappear.¹¹³

Once again we are reminded that presence is barely distinct from absence — the positive from negative. Liking pursuit of this moment — this ‘grail’ — to a quest through ‘successive, deceptive and cloudy depths’, Bataille too, distinguishes between theory — what he calls ‘discriminating intelligence’, with its will to stabilize and contain — and discourse; active, undetermined and open. Bataille notes that ‘the search, intellectually undertaken at the promptings of unsatisfied desire, has always preceded theory’s delineation of the object sought’.¹¹⁴ Lyotard also marks the territories as distinct. He writes, ‘Being announces itself in the imperative. Art is not a genre defined in terms of an end (the pleasure of the addressee), and still less is it a game whose rules have to be discovered’.¹¹⁵ Painting’s discourse is wholly *other*.

Intrinsically unstable, the contemporary experience of the sublime, once again post-trauma, demands an abstract mode of discourse appropriate to the conditions set by the subject. For Forsey and Elkins such a mode can no longer be sustained by or generated from the traditional rhetorical institutions. Sircello, on the other hand, redirects us to the primary source, to the feeling of the sublime itself. He stops short, however, of offering an alternative language or forms for such direct experience.

I have argued that while distinguishing his painting from European traditions the development of Newman’s visual language can be seen to carry surprising resonance with the radical, anti-hierarchical tenor of European dissident surrealist thinkers like George Bataille and Carl Einstein. The established symbol-systems and theory of the sublime proved entirely inadequate in relation to the trauma associated with early twentieth century global conflict that confronted artists. In place of such rhetoric and ‘confusion of philosophy’ Newman presented a starkly economical language of painting whose form insisted on unmediated material experience, subjective and self-revelatory — his ‘zip’, like the sword, severing the roots of the future and the past. In ‘The Sublime is Now’ Newman decries an absolute derived from or confused with the ‘absolutisms of perfect creations’. At the turn of the twenty-first century Forsey and Elkins lament an absolute confused with or bound to the perfect philosophical statement — which, as Newman points out, is an

‘objective rhetoric’, one, therefore, inherently at odds with the subjectivity at the heart of sublime experience it serves.

While a unified theory of the sublime may well be beyond reach, its discourse nevertheless remains materially viable. The postmodern sublime avoids the nostalgic intimations of transcendence and instead looks to presentation that exceeds representation. Reflecting upon Newman’s early painting and a traumatic history that has precipitated a return to our relations with the Absolute has offered a perspective on how so called ‘poetic language’ may in fact provide a tenable discourse of the sublime more appropriate to the innate subjective conditions of the concept. *Two Edges* supersedes Newman’s talk about the sublime. Its formal vocabulary — its plastic language — offers direct terms, real and concrete. Post-war, Newman’s pessimistic ‘new sense of fate’ turned on the tragic. Post-9/11 tragedy gives way to terror — terror that transcends Burke’s objective and quantifiable literary and literal interpretation and returns the sublime to the abstract, to the negative, to the ‘tawdry, the picayune, the brutish’ — to a sense of corporeal abjection that summons the ghost of Francis Bacon.

¹ George Bataille, ‘The Obelisk’, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings*, trans. by Allan Stoekl, (Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 214

² Pamela Franks, *The Tiger’s Eye: The Art of a Magazine*, (New York & London: Yale University Press, 2002)

³ Anne Gibson, *Issues in Abstract Expressionism: The Artist-Run Periodicals*, (Ann Arbor and London, UMI Research Press, 1990), p.25

⁴ Pamela Franks, *The Tiger’s Eye: The Art of the Magazine*, p. 29

⁵ Pamela Franks, ‘Editorial Statement, *The Tiger’s Eye Magazine*, No. 6, Dec 15, 1948’, *The Tiger’s Eye: The Art of the Magazine*, p. 104

⁶ Pamela Franks, ‘Editorial Statement, *The Tiger’s Eye Magazine*, No. 5, October 20, 1948’, *The Tiger’s Eye: The Art of the Magazine*, p. 10

⁷ *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. by John. P. O’Neill, (New York: Alfred A. Kopf, 1990), p. 304

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 308

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 172

¹⁰ Gene Ray, ‘Reading the Lisbon Earthquake: Adorno, Lyotard, and the Contemporary Sublime’, *Yale Journal of Criticism*, Vol. 17, No. 1, (Johns Hopkins University Press, Spring 2004), pp. 1-18

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 8

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- ¹² Walter Benjamin, 'The Lisbon Earthquake', *Selected Writings: Vol. 2*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone, ed. by Michael W Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 536.
- ¹³ Svend Erik Larsen, 'The Lisbon Earthquake and the Scientific Turn in Kant's Philosophy', *European Review*, Vol. 14, No. 3, (UK: Academia Europaea, 2006), p. 365
- ¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings: Vol. 2*, p. 540.
- ¹⁵ Gene Ray, 'Reading the Lisbon Earthquake: Adorno, Lyotard, and the Contemporary Sublime', p.8.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, p. 12
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Pamela Franks, 'Editorial Statement, *The Tiger's Eye*, No. 6, Dec 15, 1948', *The Tiger's Eye: The Art of the Magazine*, p. 104
- ¹⁹ Barnett Newman, 'The Sublime is Now', *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 172
- ²⁰ Robert Lebel & Isabelle Waldborg, *Encyclopedia Acephalica*, (London: Atlas Press, 1995), p.9
- ²¹ Ibid, p. 11
- ²² Pamela Franks, 'Editorial Statement, *The Tiger's Eye*, Number 7, 1949', *The Tiger's Eye: The Art of the Magazine*, p. 64
- ²³ Ibid, p. 66
- ²⁴ Robert Lebel & Isabelle Waldborg, *Encyclopedia Acephalica*, p. 66
- ²⁵ *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 88
- ²⁶ Ibid, p. 89
- ²⁷ Barnett Newman, 'The Sublime is Now', *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 172
- ²⁸ Newman's extended essay *The Plasmic Image* is one of several that marks the distance between the 'new painter' and a surrealism that Newman viewed as failed. See *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, op. cit, p. 138
- ²⁹ Pamela Franks, 'Editorial introduction, contents page, The Sublime Issue, *The Tiger's Eye*, No. 6, Dec 15, 1948', *The Tiger's Eye: The Art of the Magazine*, p. 104
- ³⁰ George Bataille, *L'Experience Interieure*, trans. by Leslie Anna Boldt, (New York: University of New York Press, 1988), p. xxxii
- ³¹ Ibid, p. xxxiii
- ³² Ibid, 'The Torment', p. 33
- ³³ Ibid, p. ix
- ³⁴ Ibid, p. 117
- ³⁵ Barnett Newman, 'The Sublime is Now', *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, 172
- ³⁶ Richard Shiff, Carol C. Mancusi-Ungaro, Heidi Colman-Freyberger, *Barnett Newman: a catalogue raisonne*, ed. by Ellyn Childs Allison, New York : Barnett Newman Foundation, New Haven, Conn, London : Yale University Press, 2004), p. 145
- ³⁷ The correspondence records in *The Tiger's Eye* archive held at the Yale University Library reveal several points of contact with George Bataille (1947, 1950)
- ³⁸ *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 164
- ³⁹ Ibid, p. 169

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- ⁴⁰ George Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings*, p. 218
- ⁴¹ Barnett Newman, *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 170
- ⁴² George Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings*, p. 222
- ⁴³ Ibid, p. 216
- ⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 217
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 222
- ⁴⁷ Barnett Newman, *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 175
- ⁴⁸ George Bataille, 'Formless', *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings*, trans. by Allan Stoekl, (Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 31
- ⁴⁹ Barnett Newman, *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 258
- ⁵⁰ Robert Lebel & Isabelle Waldberg, *Encyclopedia Acephalica*, p. 84
- ⁵¹ Rainer Rumold, 'Painting as Language, Why Not? Carl Einstein in Documents', *October*, Vol. 107, (Winter 2004) p.75
- ⁵² Ibid, p. 83
- ⁵³ Carl Einstein, 'Critical Dictionary: "Nightingale", The Etchings of Hercules Seghers', *October* 107, trans. by Charles Haxthausen (Winter 2004), p. 151
- ⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 152
- ⁵⁵ Barnett Newman, *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 169
- ⁵⁶ Jean François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. by George Van Den Abbeele, (University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 56
- ⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 13.
- ⁵⁸ Gene Ray, 'Reading the Lisbon Earthquake: Adorno, Lyotard, and the Contemporary Sublime', p. 14.
- ⁵⁹ Jean François Lyotard, 'Newman: The Instant', *The Inhuman*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington & Rachel Bowlby, (California: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 81.
- ⁶⁰ Barnett Newman, 'Ohio', *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, op. cit, p. 175
- ⁶¹ Jean François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, p. 85
- ⁶² Jean François Lyotard, 'Newman: The Instant', *The Inhuman*, p. 82.
- ⁶³ Ibid, pp. 83-84
- ⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 84
- ⁶⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶⁶ Barnett Newman, 'The Sublime is Now', *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, op.cit, p. 173
- ⁶⁷ Ibid, p, 85
- ⁶⁸ Jean François Lyotard, 'Newman: The Instant', *The Inhuman*, p. 86
- ⁶⁹ Barnett Newman, 'A New Sense of Fate', *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, op. cit. p. 169
- ⁷⁰ Ibid.
- ⁷¹ Carl Einstein, 'Notes sur le cubisme', *October*, 107, trans. by Charles W. Haxthausen (MIT Press: Winter, 2004), p. 162
- ⁷² Barnett Newman, 'The Sublime is Now', *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 173
- ⁷³ Carl Einstein, 'Notes sur le cubisme', p. 168
- ⁷⁴ Barnett Newman, 'The Sublime is Now', *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 173

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- ⁷⁵ Carl Einstein, 'Revolution Smashes Through History and Tradition', *October*, Vol. 107, trans. Charles W. Haxthausen, (MIT Press, Winter 2004), p.145
- ⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 143
- ⁷⁷ Barnett Newman, 'Interview with David Sylvester', *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, op. cit, p. 257
- ⁷⁸ Ibid, 'A Conversation: Barnett Newman and Thomas B. Hess', p. 280
- ⁷⁹ Robert Lebel & Isabelle Waldberg, *Encyclopedia Acephalica*, p. 23
- ⁸⁰ George Didi-Huberman, 'Picture = Rupture: Visual Experience, Form and Symptom according to Carl Einstein', *Papers of Surrealism*, Issue 7, trans. by C. F. B Miller, (2007), p. 2
- ⁸¹ Ibid.
- ⁸² Ibid, p.10
- ⁸³ Didi-Huberman, 'Picture = Rupture: Visual Experience, Form and Symptom according to Carl Einstein', p. 13
- ⁸⁴ Rainer Rumold, 'Painting as Language, Why Not? Carl Einstein in Documents', p. 88
- ⁸⁵ Ibid p, 84
- ⁸⁶ Didi-Huberman, 'Picture = Rupture: Visual Experience, Form and Symptom according to Carl Einstein', p.5
- ⁸⁷ Ibid p. 143
- ⁸⁸ Ibid p.144
- ⁸⁹ Barnett Newman, 'The Sublime is Now', *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 173
- ⁹⁰ Gene Ray, 'Reading the Lisbon Earthquake: Adorno, Lyotard, and the Contemporary Sublime', p. 14
- ⁹¹ Simon Morley catalogues some of the more prominent exhibitions and projects that have taken up the issue of the sublime. See *The Sublime*, (London: Whitechapel Gallery & MIT Press, 2010), p. 14
- ⁹² Christine Battersby, *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 194
- ⁹³ Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985*, ed. by Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas, trans. by Don Barry, Bernadette Maher, Julian Pefanis, Virginia Spate and Morgan Thomas, (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 33-34
- ⁹⁴ Barnett Newman, 'Interviewed by Emile De Antonio', *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 308
- ⁹⁵ Barnett Newman, 'The Sublime is Now', *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 174
- ⁹⁶ Jane Forsey, 'Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (Autumn 2007) pp. 381-389
- ⁹⁷ James Elkins, 'Against the Sublime', *Beyond the Finite: The Sublime in Art and Science*, ed. by Roald Hoffmann and Iain Boyd Whyte (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 20-42. [accessed via author's website, www.jameselkins.com, 2013].
- ⁹⁸ Jane Forsey, 'Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?', p. 383
- ⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 386
- ¹⁰⁰ Guy Sircello, 'How is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 51: 4, (Autumn, 1993), p. 548

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- ¹⁰¹ Sircello references the experimentalist writer Kate Braverman and her portrayal of LA as an incomplete city that speaks of impending terror — based on ‘unstitched borders, empty corridors, the not yet deciphered’ — on ‘the great nothing’, op. cit, p. 548
- ¹⁰² George Bataille, *L’Experience Interieure*, p.37
- ¹⁰³ Guy Sircello, ‘Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?’, p. 543
- ¹⁰⁴ George Bataille, *L’Experience Interieure*, p. 9
- ¹⁰⁵ Ibid, pp. 4-5
- ¹⁰⁶ Jane Forsey, ‘Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?’, p. 388
- ¹⁰⁷ Editorial Statement, *The Tiger’s Eye*, No. 6, Dec 15, 1948, p. 57
- ¹⁰⁸ James Elkins, ‘Against the Sublime’, p. 8
- ¹⁰⁹ Jean François Lyotard, ‘Newman: The Instant’, *The Lyotard Reader & Guide*, ed. by Keith Crome and James Williams, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 334
- ¹¹⁰ Ibid. p. 338
- ¹¹¹ Ibid, p. 330
- ¹¹² Bataille references Emile Dermenghem’s article ‘The Instant in the Works of the Mystics and Some Poets’, *Mesures*, (July 1938), *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings*, op. cit, p. 245
- ¹¹³ Ibid, p. 241
- ¹¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁵ Jean François Lyotard, ‘Newman: The Instant’, *The Inhuman*, p. 338

HIS DARK MATERIALS:
FRANCIS BACON & THE ABJECT SUBLIME

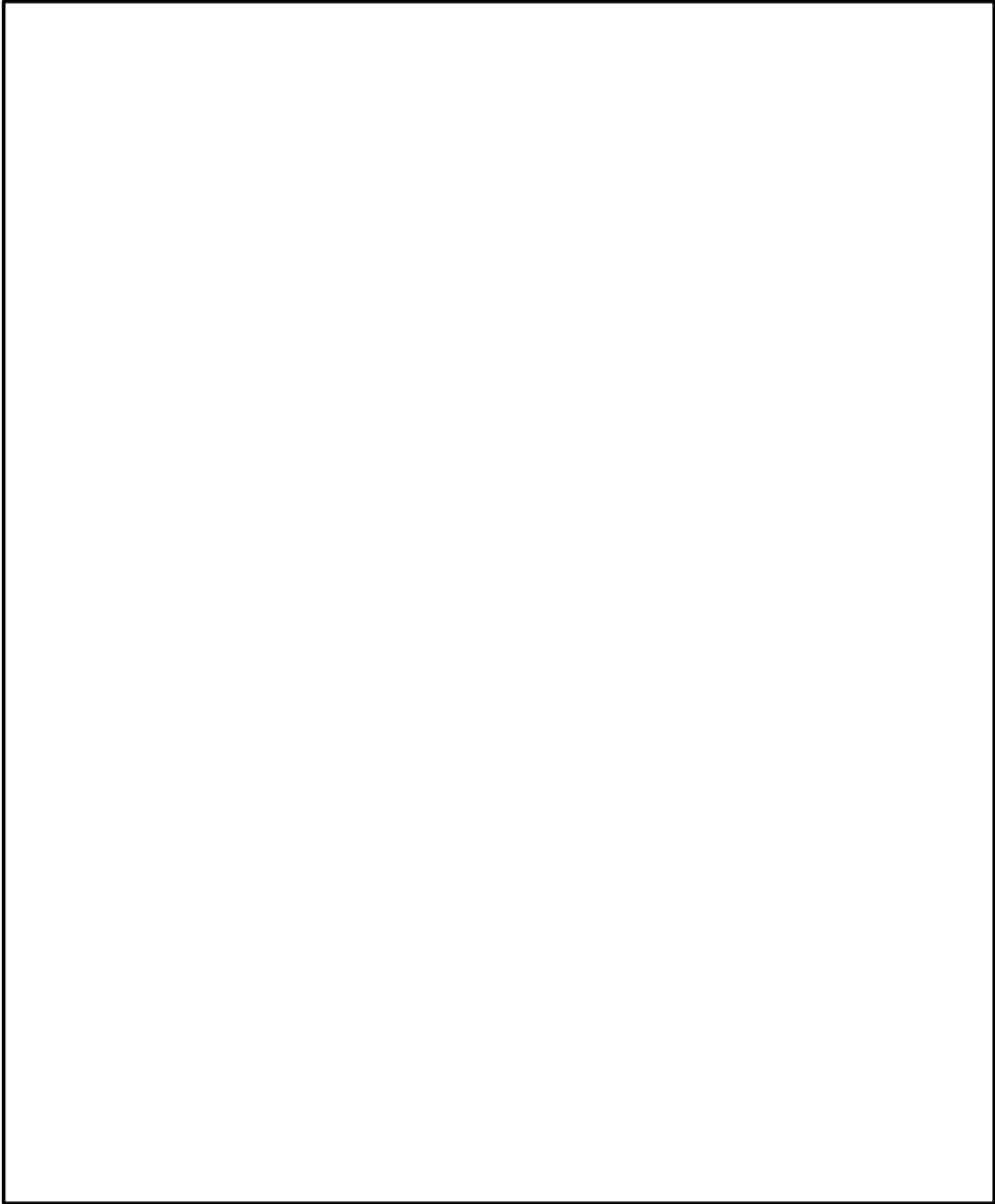


Figure 7.

This object, chaos of light and of shadow, is *catastrophe*. I perceive it as object; my thought, however, shapes it according to its image, at the same time that it is its reflection. Perceiving it, my thought itself sinks into annihilation as into a fall wherein one emits a cry. Something immense, exorbitant, is liberated in all directions with a noise of a catastrophe; this emerges from an unreal, infinite void, at the same time loses itself in it, with the shock of a blinding flash.

George Bataille¹

Tawdry, Picayune and Brutish: A Report from the Surface of a Painting

Ulster Museum — *June 3rd, 2014*. Mid-afternoon, the twentieth century gallery rooms are largely empty. In front of me, a modest sized painting with a knife-sharp gilt frame. The dark painting shifts unhelpfully behind reflective glass that at once binds the surface of the work together, offering the impression of a kind of unifying varnish, while at the same time splintering perspective and holding the spectator at remove (Figure. 7). Behind me another viewer comments, with some frustration, to a companion that, 'the eye doesn't settle anywhere'. Form appears indistinct from the physical properties of the paint itself. Such confusion draws the viewer closer to the painting, only to be forced back again, the work giving nothing up as the surface repels.

Brutish well describes both the surface and the technique of the painting. It is an image of contortion in terms of material, form and content. The soiled yellow ochre of raw reversed canvas, with tooth like sandpaper, is the ground left exposed here and there (Figure. 8). The painted surface itself varies from the *squitchy* thin-ness of the sketched-in preliminary diagrammatic structure to the sedimented and caked-on figurative form that assumes the composition's point of focus, such as it is. The black that functions as a frame within a frame is the cleanest and most chromatically vivid paint on the work and is testament to a surety of purpose that is not present throughout the rest of the surface. It has been put down quickly and left untouched. Elsewhere there is a fidgety, frustrated uncertainty to the working of the paint. Colour is almost entirely absent from the painting. It is from *unaccountable masses of shades*

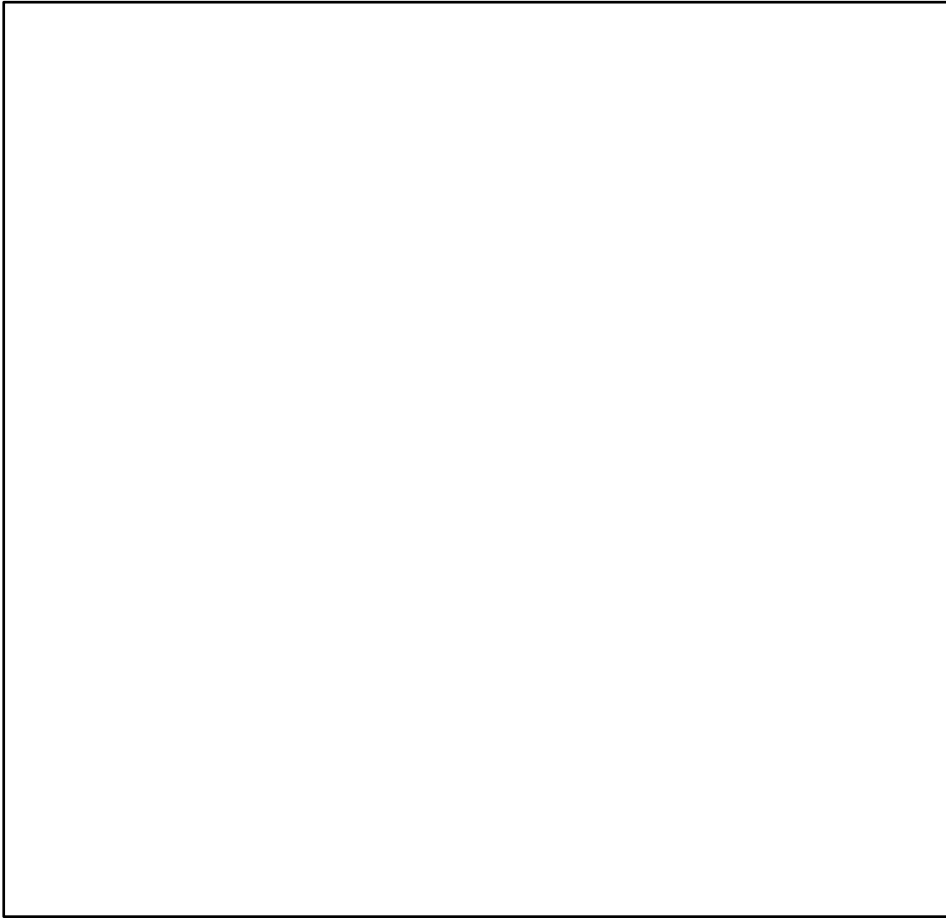
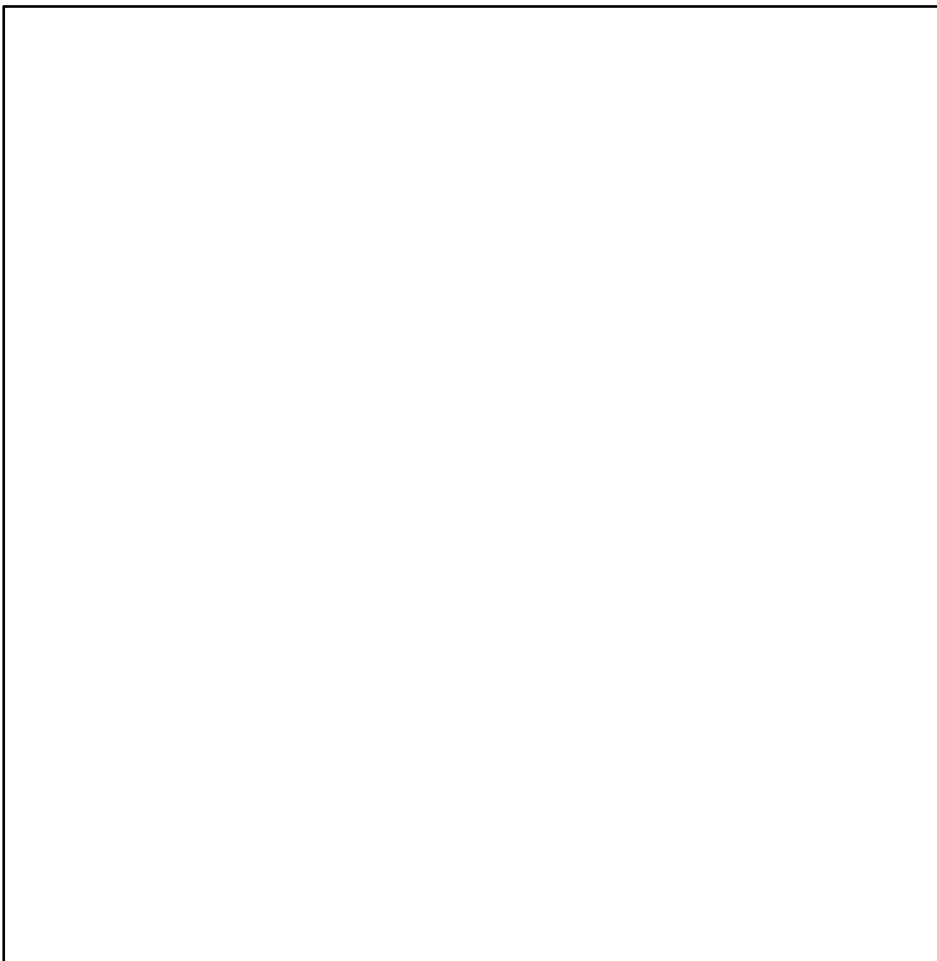


Figure. 8 & 9



and shadows that the presence of a figure (in portrait) can be discerned — but it is one that appears eaten away by the physical process of painting (Figure. 9). It seems impossible to disentangle figurative form from the form of the work's material.

The paint — which has a dust-encrusted consistency, like desiccated clay or tar — is scraped back off indeterminate zones of putty grey, broken with an uncertain, fleeting use of sap green. This dragging or smearing has resulted in a mottled, pockmarked, pot-holed surface (Figure. 10). Paint has clung doggedly to the tooth of the unprimed reverse — to the *tawdry* side of the canvas. This acrid surface directly reveals the painter's efforts and exertions. The work's material present-ness, its destabilizing *now-ness*, emanates from the physical working over and over of the image and the scrubbed out adjustments exposed in the development of the image.

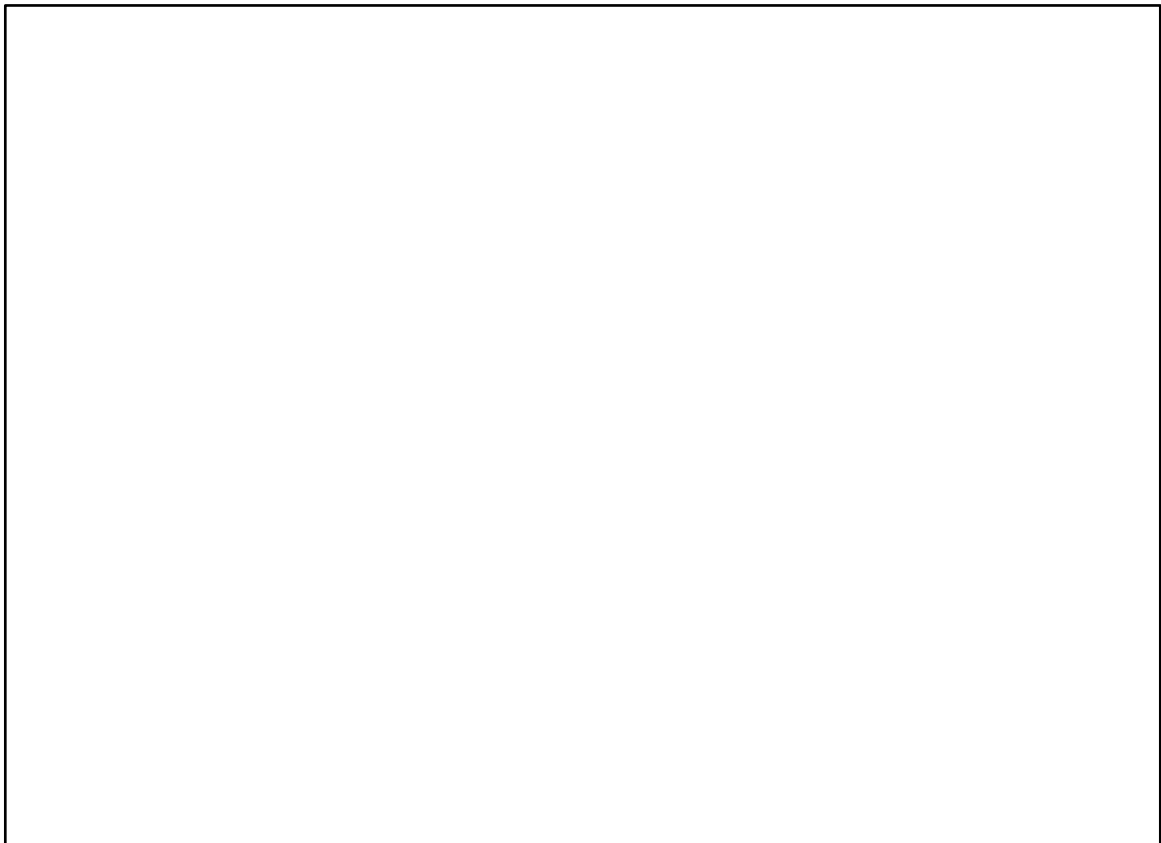


Figure. 10

Material endeavor has fused human head and shoulders with contorted, howling animal features — the ‘skin’ of the painting itself reminiscent of putrefying flesh, or elephant skin. Such brute force has made paint in certain sections slick, leaving it quick like the surface of wet limestone. The direction of the painter’s efforts contributes to the way the surface reads — to how the eye traverses the image. This material rhythm, this transitional movement between contrasting texture and gesture, equates to a kind of plastic thinking. As such the work comes close to the sculptural. Rudimentary pictorial elements that site the figure — a shirt collar, a key, an arrow — are somewhat clumsily cut away from their dark surrounds, and consequently raised above the thin-ness of the grey/black shadows. Similarly the teeth in animalistic jaws are cut out with soot black pigment (Figure. 9).

This surface is a landscape that testifies to the tension between a crushing obligation to express, to paint, and the impossibility to do so. It attests to painting as research, to the trying of effects, techniques, and the testing of material limit. The painting’s surface is an exploration of a language of immediacy, of generalities, of broad ‘strokes’ or directness — of feeling as opposed to illustration. The work remains devastatingly open — offering the spectator only the *indefinite, half-attained, and unimaginable*. 1:1 in scale and hung just below head height — further enhancing the impression of a retching contortion — the unsettling influence on the psyche comes as much from the abject materiality of the paint and the way it is applied as it does from the image itself.

The work makes its presence felt directly, but the immediate impact of the image is followed by the discomfort of the unknowable’s mocking slow-hand-clap — the disorientation brought on through visual experience that refuses to surrender to cognitive resolution. The encounter equates to a kind of torture that comes from meeting extreme limit. I cannot look hard enough at Francis Bacon’s *Head II, 1949* (Figure. 11).

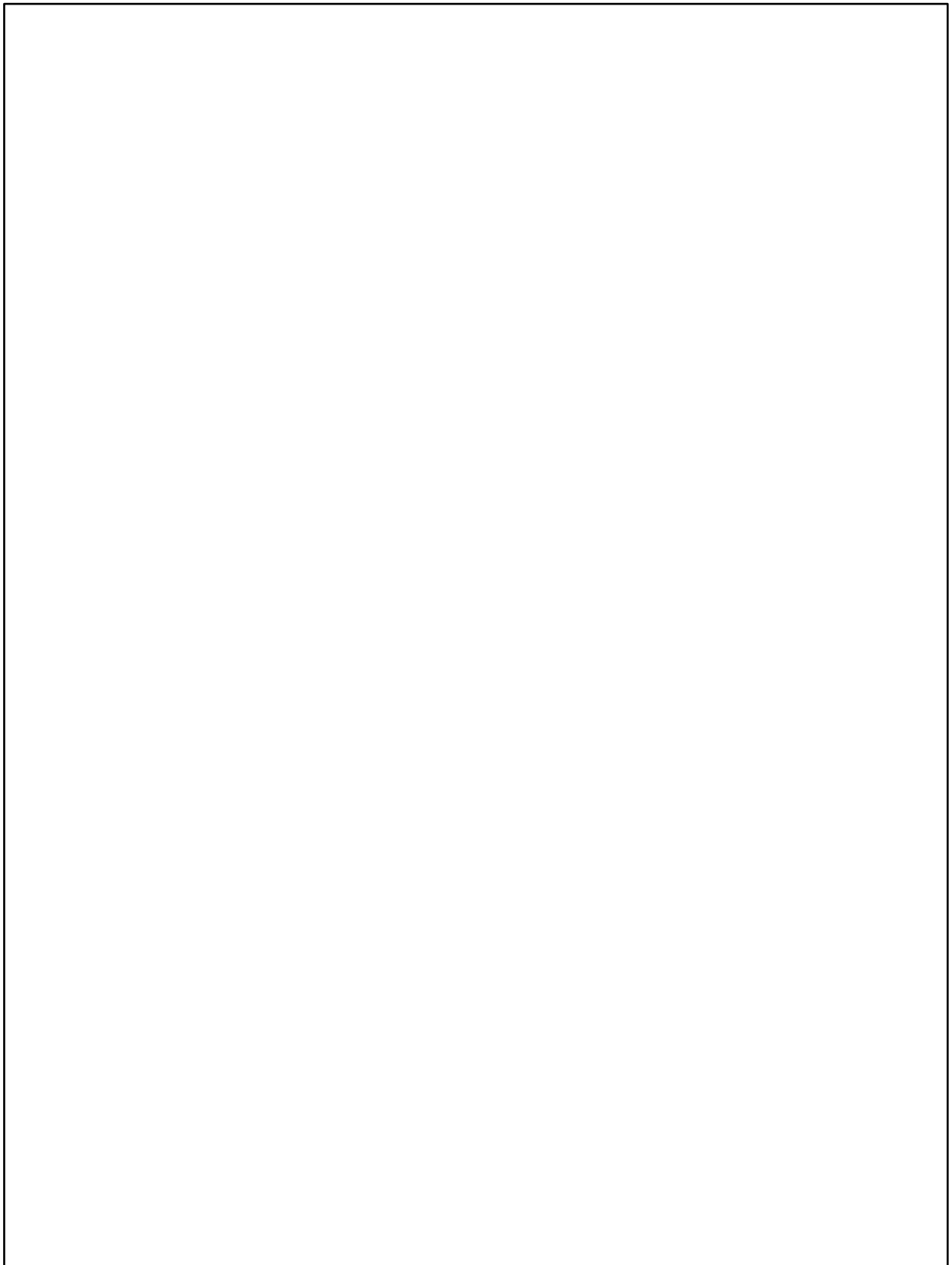


Figure. 11 Francis Bacon, *Head II*, 1949, Ulster Museum, Belfast
(Oil on canvas, 80 x 65 cm)

The pictorial structure of head and shoulders rendered with the barest of approximation on a comparatively discrete scale for Bacon creates an iconographic scaffold from which he then freely and deliberately deviates. Temporarily comforted by the formal qualities that might bring to mind, say, the drama of dark and light found in seventeenth century portraiture, and in particular Bacon's muse Rembrandt Van Rijn, the spectator is soon destabilized, as any such historical familiarity dissolves into indeterminacy and a painted surface that attests to what Philip Shaw refers to as 'the raw, material ooze of embodied experience'.² Suspended above the abyss, the traumatized spectator is left with more questions than answers.

Head II (Figure. 12) confronts the viewer with the meager, residual fragments of a human head and shoulders presented as a rudimentary articulation of corporeal mass that traverses the boundary between presence and absence. With no concession made to flesh tone, Bacon's phantasmal figure is painted in ghostly whites that come and go as the dark ground rises to reclaim ascendancy. This pictorial vacuum is tempered only by the most basic diagrammatic traces of interior geography. An inferred sense of foreground is described in the most basic of compositional terms. As such, a threshold of sorts is determined, transforming the infinity of blackness into space contained.

The figure, however, resists such attempts at confinement. Albeit in an inconclusive, provisional, derelict state, against the odds the figure endures against Bacon's brutalizing material force. The top of the head dissolves into blackness, before it fuses with a gaping bestial mouth, set perpendicular to the human profile and screaming into a void of night black. This scream is subjective. It appears on the one hand desperate, loaded with the terror of Sergei Eisenstein's frequently associated image of the stricken nursemaid from the silent 1925 film *Battleship Potemkin*, while on the other hand, exploding with the confrontational power of animal aggression. The image is further intensified through the visceral plastic qualities of the painted surface.

Image available at www.francis-bacon.com

Figure. 12 *Head II*

Like much of Bacon's painting, *Head II* challenges historical canons as well as contemporary conventions of the post war period. As Allon White states, 'One of many dialogues, or contestations which Bacon is involved in is with the transcendental escapism of the European painting tradition. First with the major forms of religious and classical iconography and secondly with the aesthetic formalism of his bourgeois contemporaries'.³

Francis Bacon: *Dissident Romantic*

Bacon is not historically associated with the sublime. However, his absence from the concept's mainstream discourse is perhaps puzzling if one considers that his painting has been consistently dialogized in terms of silence, terror, darkness and death — terms White summarizes as the 'phobic psychopathology of daily life'.⁴ At the very least Bacon's painting would seem to warrant further consideration in relation to the sublime as formulated by Edmund Burke.⁵ Bacon's absence from the account of the modern and postmodern sublime illustrates the schism between imagery of the sublime and sublime imagery, in other words between sign of affect and affect itself.

While critics like Philip Shaw and Richard White accept that Bacon's painting carries such signs of the sublime, they question to what extent the experience itself is activated in his work. Furthermore they share a consensus that more than merely failing to meet the historically established 'criteria' of the sublime, his painting, in fact, does much to unsettle its foundations, calling into question the plausibility of a coherent, unified aesthetic concept. Bacon's work, it has been argued, resists the final redeeming moment that follows a breakdown in cognitive process during an encounter with the terrifying, inconceivable, inexpressible and overwhelming — the self finds no comfort in his flayed figuration and eviscerated surfaces. Such a view exposes the problematic of the hierarchy intrinsic to discourse on the sublime. It is a hierarchy inherited from a pre-modern account of the concept; one that, fuzzy headed with a hangover from the excesses of Romanticism, continues to privilege the vertical over the horizontal — the elevation of self above an earth bound notion of the 'sacred' located in an abject materialism.

White and Shaw insist that in Bacon's painting the logic of the sublime is undone. But this is to afford too much importance to historically bound aesthetic structures based largely on the frailties of transcendence bound to the heavens and the divine. It is not the sublime itself that Bacon obliterates, but rather its narrative. Beyond 'remobilized religious iconography' contextualized in the backwash of Neo-Romantic Horror, Bacon delivers a traumatized material surface that alludes to subject — to presentation itself.⁶ The question thereby raised is, despite Bacon's refusal of transcendence is his painting any less sublime?

Echoing James Elkins' rhetoric that the literature of the sublime has failed under the weight of ever increasing critical and aesthetic complexity, White argues that rather than qualifying the sublime, Francis Bacon's painting serves to demonstrate that its structural foundations have been fatally compromised. Like Elkins, White calls for the abandonment of terms that no longer adequately service contemporary art. Framing a discussion on the limits of the aesthetics of the sublime in relation to contemporary work, White, somewhat anachronistically, draws a line between Bacon's painting and notions of poesis established in Gotthold Lessing's *Laocöon*. He suggests that the complexities of Bacon's painting prove the inadequacy of language to maintain such categories of subjective experience. For White, Bacon's painting's puts traditional conceptions of subjectivity at tension. Undoubtedly unsettling in form, content and, indeed, execution, Bacon's works seems to threaten. As Ernst van Alphen suggests

Seeing a work by Francis Bacon hurts. It causes pain. The first time I saw a painting by Bacon, I was literally left speechless. I was touched so profoundly because the experience was one of total engagement, of being dragged along by the work. I was perplexed about the level on which these paintings touched me: I could not even formulate what the paintings were about, still less what aspect of them hurt me so deeply.⁷

Such subjectivity flirts with melodrama. It is reliant upon the complicity and commitment of the spectator. Such threat turns on faith. Crucially, White points out that Bacon's work resists the ultimately positive resolution of and with self, experienced once threat has been mediated and the sovereignty of self is restored. For White the signs of the sublime may well be present in Bacon's painting, in the terror of the scream and the violence of imagery, but in the final analysis the positive reconciliation between concept and idea, between the inexpressible and the material, between the supersensible and the sensible is withheld. Fractured, unstable and irresistibly active, Bacon's work refuses to surrender; it cannot be contained by straining traditional aesthetic categories. White concludes that his painting only encourages the abandonment of such terms.

However, it is possible to argue that it is the language of the sublime that fails Bacon, rather than Bacon failing to 'qualify' as sublime, and that within the materiality of his painting there is a mode of communication, direct and subjective that equates to a language — and with it Bacon is better able to 'articulate' the logic of a concept fundamentally beyond words. Far from being a figure on the fringes of a sublime long since free of the burden of traditional associations with transcendence, Bacon deserves re-evaluation as a painter whose material language has much to contribute to a postmodern conception of sublimation and the un-representable.

The Shock of the New: A History of Violence

In 1948, the same year that Barnett Newman painted *Onement I* and declared 'The Sublime is Now', Francis Bacon painted *Head I* (Figure. 13). It was the first of a series of works that depicted the human head wildly distorted, mutating with the animal and almost entirely contingent. Shown at his first solo show at the Hanover Gallery in November 1949 the *Head* series is surely among Bacon's most visceral, textured and raw images. Culminating with the first of his papal studies, *Head VI*, 1949 — based on the work of a 1650 portrait of Pope Innocent X by Diego Velazquez — the *Head* paintings are



Image available at www.francis-bacon.com

Figure. 13 *Head I*, 1948,
(Oil and tempera on board, 100 x 74 cm)

unsettling portraits of abstraction and abjection, of the tension between noble and base, between high and low, between form and formlessness.

Set against each other there would seem little common ground between *Onement I* and *Head I*. Resolutely figurative, Bacon's painting would appear polemically opposed to Newman's reified color field abstraction that boldly and vocally staked a claim to the territory of the sublime. However, rather than viewing these early and pivotal works as mutually antagonistic, what might be revealed by instead exploring their potential dialogue? If, as Lyotard states, it is the sublime that has given all modern art its impetus and axioms, by interrogating such radically different vocabularies what might be revealed about painting as language of the inexpressible?

The language of painting and painting as language can be seen as central to the concerns of both artists. Newman's painting, loaded as it is with his insistent, ever-present critical perspective, keeps faith with written language and its ability to articulate and inform the lofty aspirations of self-revelation and the re-presentation of transcendent experience. For Bacon, on the other hand, painting exposes the limits of language in relation to inner experience — as the sublime overwhelms the self, so too it overwhelms language. Struck dumb, our ability to articulate is suspended, leaving only un-mediated sensation. The paralysis is traumatic. Both *Head I* and *Onement I* share a common history of violence. Transgressing long established traditional modes, these works painfully exposed the limits of language in relation to the experience of new forms. Referring to earlier paintings by Bacon (*Three Studies For Figures at the Base of the Crucifixion*) exhibited in April 1945 at the Lefevre Gallery in London, John Russell comments that Bacon's work proved incendiary — 'They caused a total consternation' he comments. Russell continues

We had no name for them, and no name for what we felt about them. They were regarded as freaks, monsters irrelevant to the concerns of the day, and the product of a mind so eccentric as not to count in any possible permanent

way. They were specters at what we all hoped was going to be a feast, and most people hoped that they would just be quietly put away.⁸

Newman's *Onement I* proved no less divisive. Providing the foundations to his first solo shows at the Betty Parsons Gallery in New York in 1950 and 1951, the painting confronted spectators with a subjective experience, which at that point went beyond categorization. Where consternation greeted Bacon's painting, Newman's work was met with open hostility among critics and the artistic community he was so often an outspoken advocate for. Like Bacon, who, as a self-taught late starter was on the fringes of London's post war painting community, Newman was also something of an outsider. A native New Yorker, periods teaching and an intellectualized perspective on painting resulted in a marginalized position among the more overtly bohemian immigrant artists congregating around the Cedar Tavern. Confronted with the body of work that developed from *Onement I* for the 1951 Parsons Gallery show this community all but turned their back on Newman. Thomas Hess recounts an un-named member of the New York clique attacking Newman directly, commenting, 'I thought you were one of us, but I see you're a threat to us all'.⁹ As Hess points out Newman's work was viewed by his immediate contemporaries as the shock tactics of an ideologue intent on dragging painting ever closer towards degree zero. Clement Greenberg reflects that Newman's painting was among that which provoked violent protest against what was seen as the 'reductio ad absurdum of Abstract Expressionism and modern art in general'.¹⁰

In the wake of protest and consternation, critical theory sought to find the language to assimilate these new forms into the ongoing post war cultural narrative. To a greater or lesser extent, each artist soon found a champion. In 1952 Clement Greenberg defended the 'nerve and truth' of Newman's painting against the rejection and resentment the painter had experienced from a 'quarter where one had the most right to expect a puzzled judgment to be a suspended one'.¹¹ For Greenberg the accusation of mere shock tactics was baseless. He writes

Newman simply aimed at and attained the maximum of his truth within the tacit and evolving limits of our Western tradition of painting [...] These paintings have the effect that makes one know immediately that he is in the presence of art [...] A work of art can make you angry only if it threatens your habits of taste; but if it tries only to take you in, and you recognize that, you react with contempt, not with anger.¹²

Published in the *Partisan Review*, Greenberg's comments in support of Newman were made in an article entitled, perhaps anachronistically considering his devout formalism, 'Feeling is All'. In it honesty and authenticity are what seems to differentiate the threat of genuinely avant-garde painting from that which merely hoodwinks the spectator with coarse, transparent 'up-to-date devices'. In other words, good painting comes down to a matter of faith, no longer rooted in theology and the divine, but rather in material presence/essence. Good painting — painting that stands up to the accepted triumphs of 'high classical art' — comes down to faith in matter. As Greenberg would have it *feeling* should not be confused with emotional content, as for example, witnessed in European post war painting as existential crisis, nor as a mandate for transcendence; rather feeling counts formally, as concrete material authenticity. For Greenberg feeling is generated when *medium* is all.

Material integrity or truth to medium prevents painting succumbing to its innate desire for (a return to) the 'grand manner'; a phrase Greenberg used during an interview in *Studio International* in 1968 to disparage the painting ushered in after Burke's theory on the sublime had gained the ascendancy in the mid-eighteenth century. Associated with Haydon, John Martin and Turner, this 'grand style' or *terribilita* that saw British art get its 'nose bloodied for a time' is for Greenberg once again detectable in post war European art — 'The dream of the grand manner has come up again in England', he comments.¹³ Greenberg names several artists' likely responsible for the renewed threat of the sublime. Francis Bacon is prominent among them. His view of the painter is characteristically caustic. While admitting that some of Bacon's work succeeds in 'getting to him', viewed in totality it fails to win him over. For Greenberg, Bacon is guilty of

[...] the cheapest, coarsest, least felt application of paint matter I can visualize, along with the most transparent, up-to-date devices [...] Bacon is the one example in our time of *inspired* safe taste — taste that's inspired in the way in which it searches out the most up-to-date of your "rehearsed responses". Some day, if I live long enough, I'll look back on Bacon's art as a precious curiosity of our period. In the meantime I'm caught in the same period. Actually, I enjoy it: I mean I enjoy being taken in as long as I know I'm being taken in.¹⁴

There would seem to be little room in the ivory tower of high modernism for painting whose approach to materiality resists flatness, whose truth to medium conspires to allow illusory depth to persist and the figure, however mutated or abstracted, to endure. It endures, however, in the context of a truth to materials that challenges the ivory tower's foundations. As Allon White comments, 'Bacon's painting's are figurative and representational, yet what they figure is a process, an act of graphic expulsions' — expulsions that insist upon immediate understanding of material experience.¹⁵

Greenberg was not alone in taking issue with Bacon's perceived lack of authenticity. As David Allen Mellor establishes, critics like Lawrence Alloway and John Berger decried Bacon's rising status.¹⁶ Accused of constructing 'pictorial cabinets where perverse scenarios were melodramatically represented' Mellor points to Berger's contention that Bacon was merely a 'brilliant stage manager', sunk in abjection and fundamentally at odds with the irresistible tide of cultural modernism.¹⁷ However, with equal weight given to Bacon's apotheosis, sanctioned by, in the first instance Robert Melville and then by David Sylvester and later Gilles Deleuze, his painting serves to reveal how the boundary between critical positions proved ultimately illusory, exposing the inadequacy of aesthetic logic and the fragility of critical meta-narratives. Un-categorizable and uncontainable, Bacon's work resides between territories. His painting forces slippage between boundaries; between aesthetic rules and between polarities of critical theory. For example, Mellor points out that Lawrence Alloway 'grappled with the dialectics of mass-

cultural referents and the persistence of the Grand Manner' in Bacon and even Berger eventually recanted'.¹⁸ He goes on to note that

The trajectory of moulding Bacon for different cultural audiences, from 1945 to the mid-1960's, which began with commentary and ventriloquizing from nervous Bloomsbury commentators, culminated in the sovereign televisual personality who, in the words of the Radio Times, 'above all [...] speaks for himself'.¹⁹

Newman too brought pressure to bear on the carefully 'policed' borders of critical writing. Stridently associated with the sublime his painting asks questions of Greenberg's puritanical formalism, where the notion of *feeling* has little to do with the sensation of the sublime, with anything that might raise the specter of the Grand Manner. Apparently cautious of muddying the waters with mis-appropriated language, when Greenberg's article was re-printed in *Art and Culture* he changed its title from 'Feeling is All' to the more neutral 'Partisan Review "Art Chronicle", 1952'.

Negotiating presentation itself, the material language of modern painting in the end could not be contained within the logic of modernism. The sublime pays no heed to carefully plotted critical agenda. No sooner has its form become accessible, familiar and comprehensible, the concept sheds its skin to be reborn — quasi-theological Romantic awe manifest in the power of nature gives way to the nature of the inexpressible manifest in materiality, a broad vocabulary of mark and gesture as well as the properties of paint as physical matter. The trajectory of the sublime through the twentieth century and beyond, in relation to painting particularly, has been a downward one; a process of reduction — towards absolute flatness in *Onement I* and towards absolute abjection in *Head I*, the 'reductum ad absurdum' of the human figure. 'Speaking for itself' painting continued to expand its language, beyond the frame of critical writing and the limits of aesthetic logic as they struggled to absorb an increasingly diverse vocabulary.

Although the positioning of Bacon as London School archetype, ratified through a perceived kinship with the old masters, articulating a downbeat vision of modern (urban) life irreversibly tainted by wartime trauma, is understandable, such a narrative ultimately seems to fall short when one gets close to the surface of his work. Similarly, the view later developed of the painter as arbiter of an alternative modernism where chance, mass-produced photographic imagery and a brutish material resolution conspired to undo traditions of transcendence by refusing ‘to allow conventional beauty to obliterate or falsify the moments of abjection which permeate daily life’, relies on the impossible task of reconciling the complexities of Bacon’s abstraction of the figure with a constantly and necessarily regenerating aesthetic concept.²⁰

Both *Onement I* and *Head I* contribute to a language of negation, of ‘self’ and transcendence. In these paintings the sublime is arguably brought back down to earth from the heavens with shock that erupts from the new. Inches away from either work the impossibility of presentation becomes painfully clear in the material facts of *Now*. The direct language of painting trumps aesthetic logic. To a greater or lesser degree both works confront the spectator with the (negative) realization that subject and object, void and presence, the sacred and the profane cannot be reconciled. Temporarily suspended in the physical body of paint the complexities of sublime logic unravel — the gestures and marks found therein pointing instead to an open conception, to discourse delimited.

Dust to Dust: Painting and the Abject Sublime

In his 2013 essay ‘Modernism and the Sublime’, Phillip Shaw describes the ‘uneasy’ relationship of nineteenth and twentieth century art to the sublime. He charts the collapse of the religious scaffolding that previously supported the concept under the weight of materialism, and in so doing arrives at ‘The Abject Sublime’ and the painting of, among others, Francis Bacon.²¹



Image available at www.francis-bacon.com

Figure. 14 Francis Bacon, *Blood on Pavement*, 1988
(Oil on canvas 198 x 147.5 cm)

Shaw comments that on the face of things Bacon's viscous material resolution would seem to have little to do with the sublime.²² He states that in Bacon's painting 'an idea of the sublime is raised, only to be mocked, interrogated, mourned and finally torn to pieces'.²³ He sets Bacon's painting *Blood on Pavement*, 1988 (Figure. 14) against later works by Mark Rothko to argue that 'Bacon sets out to destroy the sublime through a violent immersion in abject matter'.²⁴ Drawing on certain formal, compositional affiliations between Bacon's *Blood on Pavement* and Rothko's painting he makes the case that, in the end, the revelatory response associated with the transcendental structures of abstract expressionism are suspended by Bacon's insertion of the livid red blood stain of the works title. The veil of the infinite is suddenly and shockingly removed. The eternal contemplative horizon is polluted, poisoned, desecrated and brought low by the smear that traces human remains — that traces human pain. As Shaw makes clear

Whatever remained of the transcendent in Rothko's painting is completely obliterated with the introduction of this ugly, anamorphic stain. In imitation of Rothko's earlier work, the red mark seems to hover on the surface of the painting; but rather than providing an intimation of immortality, it serves instead as a memento mori.²⁵

Bacon's bloodstain embodies a negative, abject conception of a sublime *Other*. Where Rothko and Barnett Newman pursued an ultimately affirmative moment of self-awareness, Bacon steadfastly denies any such positive resolution. There is no redemption alluding to anything 'higher' as such. The sacred is reduced to nothing more than the smear, profane and abject — the sacred is reduced to blood on the floor, provoking the anxiety that comes with the final revelation that 'you are this, which is so far from you, this which is the ultimate formlessness'.²⁶ Bacon's painting re-orientates the sublime experience from the vertiginous towards the horizontal, to an unflinching confrontation with the terrifyingly finite, visceral and bodily nature of human existence. Shaw writes

The sublime, even in Lyotard's contemporary version, is ultimately reassuring insofar as it opens up a higher or more authentic plane of being that we are held to belong to. But nothing like this is present in Bacon's work which offers no reassurance — even though it must be said that Bacon's work is not simply nihilistic, for in focusing intensively on the human figure, and by addressing and uncovering the powers of darkness that threaten us, it also seems to speak for an intensely charged life.²⁷

The material reality of *Head II* is charged with just such intensity — a sense of presence derived from expressive and material gesture that reduces the human form to the in-between — to the state of formlessness. The image becomes if not equal to then, in fact, subsidiary to the paint itself. Describing this balancing act, Bacon comments that 'One of the problems is to paint like Velasquez but with the texture of a hippopotamus skin'.²⁸ The textured body of paint in *Head II*, likely thickened with the dust and filth Bacon had begun to use in his paintings from the chaos of his studio, is applied with no reverie. Unusually for Bacon *Head II* was a painting that he allowed to develop over time, completing the work in 'about four months'.²⁹ His failed attempts to scrub paint off, to cancel out, gives rise to a partial, broken, or decomposing surface, composed of paint and literally decaying matter (dust), that makes manifest the base materialism of Bataille's informe.

Bataille employs dust to re-form, invert/subvert category in the *Critical Dictionary*. Agent in the irresistible erosion of the figure/ground distinction, dust is the quintessence of formless-ness. A heterogeneous compound formed from the *other*, it is the physical, objective world brought low, figuratively and literally. Among these abject materials the human form or figure — skin, hair and bone — is in ruin. Dust, Bataille offers, will be there as material witness when hierarchies are leveled once and for all and new language evolves from the 'obsessions, phantoms, spectres' of cultural forms, long since buried, like the fallen of Pompeii, under the silencing blanket of dust and decay. Bataille writes

One day or another, it is true, dust, supposing it persists, will probably begin to gain the upper hand over domestics, invading the immense ruins of abandoned buildings, deserted dockyards; and, at that distant epoch, nothing will remain to ward off night-terrors, for lack of which we have become such great book-keepers...³⁰

The language of the literature — the ‘book-keeper’s’ logic — is superseded by a contingent, non-objective but nevertheless physical presence that ushers in the ‘night-terrors’ of unmediated experience of the (sub-conscious) imaginative. Echoing Bataille’s sensibility Bacon comments on his technique of mixing dust with his paint, stating ‘Well, dust seems to be eternal — seems to be the one thing that lasts forever’.³¹ The ‘eternal’ here is devoid of mythic or mystical memory. Nevertheless, Bacon elevates dust to the status of material vehicle for realism re-configured as a conception of sensorial fact, based on ‘lies that are truer than the literal truth’.³² Where he allows paint to settle it is to make plastic a visual, gestural language of immediacy. Michel Leiris, with whom Bacon was well familiar, qualifies this ‘immediacy’, this sensational experience, this feeling as being

akin to that blend of ecstasy and anguish which is known as sacred horror, and which is perhaps experienced most acutely in those vertiginous moments, prompted by the most widely different causes, when we have the sensation of entering into intimate contact with ultimately revealed reality.³³

Leiris argues that this experience is ‘innocent of any aspiration to the sublime’, going on to suggest that Bacon’s pictorial features, his particular diction aims at

the power to entangle the spectator in the toils of what might be called a *blank liturgy* which, having no transcendental references whatsoever, and existing only for its own sake, is all the more moving through being quite untinged by any dubious implications.³⁴

Bacon’s work may indeed be innocent of aspirations to a defunct pre-modern form of the sublime tethered to religion, however, the destabilizing force of his

‘blank liturgy’, manifest in the abject surface of *Head II*, ensures that an experience equivalent to transcendence, albeit God-less, is nevertheless activated. Simply because traditional language fails to accommodate such a paradigm shift from the theological to the secular does not necessarily mean the experience that Barnett Newman equated with ‘the ecstasy of true understanding’ cannot serve to re-configure the sublime.

In the Head series Bacon takes the figure as historical motif of beauty and butchers it. His painting process is orientated towards the violence of the abject. Such techniques are employed in an ‘attempt to bring the figurative thing up onto the nervous system more violently and more poignantly’.³⁵ Movement, gesture, material and mark disrupt and subtract leaving the figurative remnants latent, half-formed, demanding collaboration and self-reflection from the spectator. In *Head II* paint as flesh is vulnerable and perishable — like stain and spittle Bacon’s paint is bodily and base. As William Townsend comments Bacon’s paint is ‘a kind of slime, showing that a human being had passed through’ (a description Bacon was to subsequently claim as his own in 1955).³⁶

In his exploration of phenomenological ontology, Jean Paul Sartre, conceives slime or sliminess as a kind of materiality of ambiguity or intuition — as a ‘substance between two states’ which ‘transcends the opposition of the psychic and the physical, by revealing itself to us as the ontological expression of the entire world’.³⁷ Sartre separates the material eloquence of slime from its symbolic value, from the temptation to endow it with morality or psychoanalytical associations and meanings. While he acknowledges the potential of such symbolic or interpretive appropriation, Sartre posits *slimy* as a mode of being and as such reliant upon sensory intuition rather than cognition or analysis — upon feeling rather than thinking — upon the psychic qualities of materials rather than their symbolic value. These psychic qualities transcend the ‘brute being there’ of ‘pure encountered existence’. *Slimy* alludes to a mode of being, writes Sartre, ‘which is eternity and infinite temporality because it is a perpetual change without anything which changes’.³⁸

Within Sartre's conception of *slimy* we find a language of the abject that would subsequently have proximity to that of George Bataille and later Julia Kristeva. *Slimy* serves a process of degradation. In *sliminess* self is reduced to a low other. 'It lives obscurely under my fingers,' Sartre writes, 'and I sense it like a dizziness; it draws me to it as the bottom of a precipice might draw me'.³⁹ Like slime, Bacon's paint has a gluey, sucky, stickiness that gives and resists in equal measure — It is a '*leech sucking me*'.⁴⁰ This *dizziness* equates to an experience of the sacred devoid of religious association. Oil paint too has a certain innate sliminess. Sartre's words have resonance to Bacon's physicality and process. Beneath scrubbing brush, rag and fingers, the boundaries between body and material become indistinct. Sartre writes

That sucking of the slimy which I feel on my hands outlines a kind of *continuity* of the slimy substance in myself. These long, soft strings of substance which fall from me to the slimy surface (when, for example, I plunge my hand into it and then pull it out again) symbolize a flowing of myself toward the slime [...] If I sink in the slimy, I feel that I am going to be lost in it; that is, that I may dissolve in the slime precisely because the slimy is in the process of solidification [...] In the very apprehension of the slimy, a gluey substance, compromising and without stability, there is the haunting memory of a *metamorphosis*.⁴¹

It is form once known that haunts memory dissolved back to nothingness, back to substance, to pure *stuff-ness*. The metamorphosis is the figure corroded back into the ground and left contingent, incomplete. This haunting is manifest, in a sense, in the calcified crust of pigment that accounts for the figure in Bacon's *Head II*. In contrast to the flow of slime, to the *speed* of paint being worked across the support, here pigment has returned to its primary mineral-like state — leaving a kind of geology of expressive endeavor and impossibility caked to the support like gobbled-up phlegm dried hard to a school desk.

The acid surface sees the distinction between figure and ground irreversibly degraded, leaving only a no-mans-land of subjectivity. This *non-object* establishes the overwhelming conditions that push the spectator over the precipice into sublime experience. While Bataille resists the term sublime, Julia Kristeva does not. 'The abject', she states, 'is edged with the sublime'.⁴² It is not merely a physical state, but, like Bataille's informe, it is operative — it is process. Kristeva argues that 'It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'.⁴³ Abjection is, in this sense, gesture — gesture that fills the void left in the wake of the collapse of religious scaffolding that for so long propped up transcendent experience. As Kristeva writes, 'Abjection accompanies all religious structurings and reappears, to be worked out in a new guise, at the time of their collapse'.⁴⁴ Bacon's material vocabulary of disruptive gesture terrorizes the figure and scrambles the distinction between the self and the abject. The sublime is reconfigured not around the figure as reflection of divine image but rather around the brutish Bataillean fact of corporeal mortality — around the smeared and the secreted, around the 'ugly, anamorphic stain' of Bacon's *Blood on Pavement*. Insides are turned out — there is *a kind of continuity of the slimy substance in myself*. Without the security of coherent figuration in relation to established symbolic value we sink into unmediated experience — we sink into *Now*. There is no longer separation between the object and our self.

'The abject', writes Kristeva, 'confronts us [...] with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of the *animal*'.⁴⁵ In the smeared and the scrubbed paint of Bacon's *Head II* we can locate such *fragile states*. 'The "sublime" object', writes Kristeva, 'dissolves in the raptures of a bottomless memory' — the *haunting memory of a metamorphosis*. There is a downward shift — the sublime object dissolves in the rupture of the abject in painting. Held on the threshold between becoming and corroding, the figure strays irresistibly towards the bodily, base and bestial — *There is a flowing towards the slime*. The spectator ventures too close to the material surface, lured by

the ambiguities of formlessness, and is overwhelmed, like a 'wasp which sinks into the jam and drowns in it'.⁴⁶

Such an abject conception of the sublime, found in Bacon's painting, Shaw suggests, offers nothing more than the abstract medium of paint alone to account for 'supernatural experiences' once affiliated to the divine.⁴⁷

Regarding Rothko, by way of Bacon, Shaw writes,

The viewer may well come away with the impression that there is, after all, nothing to see in this work. Thus, while on the one hand the painting seems to encourage a revelatory response, akin in many ways to the effect of the Romantic sublime in works by Turner, of whom Rothko was a great admirer, it works no less to baffle or block such a response [...] In the face of this work it becomes impossible to sustain the sense of a determinate beyond.⁴⁸

The sublime is no longer adequately defined, nor contained — rather it is sticky, the sublime itself is sucky, slimy. Such a state returns us to Sartre who characterizes *slimy* as an 'Antivalue' — 'a type of being not realized but threatening which will perpetually haunt consciousness as the constant danger which it is fleeing'.⁴⁹ This irreconcilable state, *not realized but threatening*, condemns the sublime to the in-between of the abject. Shaw marks such an impasse in the painting of Cezanne. He writes

For Cezanne [...] a painful awareness of the inadequacy of form and content, an inadequacy directly related to the impossibility of presenting a synthesis between mind and the world, culminates not in the discovery of a capacity for transcendence but in the acknowledgement of the mind's entanglement with the alien matter of the world [...] What these brush marks signify is not the resurgence of an occluded world, but the anamorphic oozings, the traces of the Real that remain when the world submits to signification.⁵⁰

In his conclusion Shaw quotes Jean Fisher, who states 'It may be that sublimity consists in nothing more than 'the movement of desire': in our desire to know what is beyond the painted veil; in the feeling that something "lost" must be recovered'.⁵¹ Such movement can be determined in Bacon's painting

process — in the ‘explosive impulses’ cauterized into the surface of paintings like *Head II*. Such materiality testifies to the impossibility of any such redemptive recovery. The veil remains drawn.

Painting the Scream: Obligation and Impossibility

Shaw’s discussion of Bacon in relation to Rothko demonstrates the potential value of perspectives gained from the collision of that which appears opposite. While traditional art historical narrative would have painters like Barnett Newman and Francis Bacon placed in distinct and mutually exclusive territories, viewing their work through the prism of a Bataillean, downward-facing sublime instead reveals unexpected common ground between unlikely contemporaries. It is worth noting that Shaw employs late-career paintings by Rothko and Bacon. Slick, established and commodified, such late works drift into the category of the familiar, the crafted — the merely beautiful — arguably undermining his dissection of a modern sublime defined by abjection. In this respect there is perhaps more to be mined from the violence and disruption of Newman and Bacon’s early exploration of experimental forms of visual language. Despite employing markedly different vocabularies Newman and Bacon expand, transform and re-contextualize a language of alterity no longer confined to traditional, failing categories of subjective aesthetics. Both painters articulate an existential sense of limit experience — Newman and Bacon both paint the scream.

While the dense, windowless space of The Rothko Chapel, or the sheer scale of Newman’s *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* (1951) may physically overwhelm the spectator; Bacon’s paintings do so psychologically. They provoke a state of ‘giddy instability and fear’, derived not merely from the ghoulish imagery frequently found therein, but from their purging of divinity through paint as viscera.⁵² As the body succumbs to the material forces of abjection, identity fails. This corrosion of the self is also at the heart of an encounter with Newman’s painting. ‘The fetish and the ornament, blind and mute, impress only those who cannot look at the terror of self’ writes Newman, ‘The self, terrible and constant, is for me the subject matter of painting and sculpture’.⁵³

Standing — as Newman expressly directed — just inches from the surface of his painting, boundaries between object and subject collapse. Self and other fuse in the white heat of the privileged instant of all-at-once visual experience. Such experience is neither stable nor positive. Yve-Alain Bois points out the affirmation of “Here I am” is almost immediately inverted — ‘I am barely visible, almost left over’.⁵⁴ Behind the veil of an ostensibly seductive surface Newman, like Bacon, proposed that art address ‘the basic truth of life, which is its sense of tragedy’.⁵⁵

Similarly Bacon’s means of delivery — how he physically puts paint down — attests to an unflinching ‘singular insistence on the brutish reality of human experience’.⁵⁶ This particular handling of materials provokes a shift in discourse from the theoretical to the plastic. Bacon pursues an elusive in-between state in painting to realize what he described as a ‘tightrope walk between what is called figurative painting and abstraction’.⁵⁷ This tipping point activated what he termed *sensation* — a felt experience of visual gesture, privileging the nervous system above cognitive process. In its insistence upon subjective reciprocity, such *sensation* marginalizes the object in favor of new forms, factual but unreliable. Image is trapped, like a spider under glass. Much of his vocabulary points obliquely to a belief in the potential of painting as language — distinct from the written word and in opposition to the tyranny of aesthetic literature and historical narrative. ‘If you could explain your painting,’ remarks Bacon, ‘you would be explaining your instincts’.⁵⁸ Newman too makes us acutely aware of the frailties of the word in relation to painting. ‘Modern painting’, he states, ‘is an attempt to change painting into a poetic language’.⁵⁹ As Mel Bochner comments, ‘He (Newman) understood that his work exposed the rupture between painting and language, yet simultaneously sought to close it’.⁶⁰

For Bacon ‘Painting is really a very unique thing in the sense that writing is not, because writing and common speech are very near to one another, whereas painting is something totally removed. It’s the most artificial of the arts’.⁶¹ The propensity for obfuscation and confusion in ‘common speech’ and the written word is made clear in Bacon’s misleading use of the word

‘artificial’. Bacon employs it as a positive term. He uses it against the grain to invoke a certain *factuality*, or authenticity that comes from the intrinsically artificial language of painting.

While Newman’s *Onement* paintings are not as texturally verbose as Bacon’s, nevertheless there is a tension between control and accident in Newman’s work that points to something of a shared sensibility in intuitive methods. Like Bacon, Newman insisted that he worked without preparation. ‘I work directly’, Newman declares, ‘I move immediately to the canvas and I have never worked from a sketch or built anything up’.⁶² Bacon shares such faith in the intuitive act of painting. He remarks, ‘my ideal would really be just to pick up a handful of paint and throw it at the canvas and hope that the portrait was there’.⁶³ The apparent compositional rigor of the *Onement* series belies Newman’s pursuit of painting over and above mere picture making. ‘If my paintings have meaning,’ comments Newman, ‘isn’t it so because of my greater intuition and if that, isn’t it because they are exercises in contrived spontaneity?’⁶⁴ Suzanne Penn gives a detailed account of the material and textural variation in Newman’s work.⁶⁵ The use of masking tape in the creation of his zips facilitates an immediacy and unpredictability of form and surface defined by the physical process of painting. Bleeding tape edges, stained and flaking gesso, coagulated pigment, passages of dripping sprayed paint and sections of raw canvas exposed by a scything palette knife reveal an unexpectedly abject quality to Newman’s surface that brings him further into proximity with Bacon.

Neither *Head I* nor *Onement I* can be viewed in isolation but rather as preliminaries. They form the foundations of a series that for both artists would ultimately comprise six works. For both, these paintings proved a catalyst for their approach to form, material and subject. Both painters progressed swiftly to consolidate their prototypes. Like Bacon, Newman privileges the intensity of concrete experience — the ‘physical *sensation* of time’ — encountered directly through material language. Newman doubled his scale and refined the painterly qualities of the ‘zip’ with *Onement II* (1948). While Bacon substituted the singular, flat black, diagrammatically described pictorial arena of *Head I*

with a more ambiguous, claustrophobic and textured geography in *Head II* — established by his introduction of the curtain motif, a device that would persist for the remainder of the *Head* series and into the papal portrait studies thereafter.

Much interpretive mileage has been derived from the curtain in Bacon's painting. It is an undoubtedly obliging motif upon which countless interpretive references and associations have been hung. It lends itself to the notion of the 'extreme situation', of confinement, isolation and incarceration prevalent in, for instance, John Russell's view of the 'circumstantially valid' narrative of existential anxiety in Bacon's work, born of history's traumatized memory.⁶⁶ Russell associates the use of the curtain in *Head II* with the creation of a *real* but nevertheless fictive space that liberated Bacon to explore a kind of Batailleian interiority of the human condition. Something painting historically had not, to that point, sought to articulate was

the disintegration of the social being which takes place when one is alone in a room which has no looking-glass. We may feel at such times that the accepted hierarchies of our features are collapsing, and that we are by turns all teeth, all eye, all ear, all nose.⁶⁷

This unmediated encounter with the unconscious of the 'immediate human being', wherein — to quote Carl Einstein — 'parts of objects, markers of ideas, surface like words', an accurate summary, perhaps, of Bacon's *Head II*, where a sense of figuration is implied formally, but as viewing continues semblance falls apart into heterogeneous parts — a shoulder, a gaping, screaming bestial mouth, a safety pin, an arrow.⁶⁸ Like ideas themselves, the image forms briefly, coalescing in scrubbed and matted paint, before dissolving under the force of physical manipulation, as the mirage turns to dust.

Bacon used the curtain as a kind of psychoactive mediator of atmosphere or feeling. It is threshold — a recognizable but nevertheless blank setting, projecting both spectator and participants to a place of Beckett-like non-space — theatrical, morphic and deceptive. With it Bacon screens off the abyss. He

draws a painterly, expressive and translucent veil across Malevich's black square, across the totem of modernist dogma. As a pictorial structure the veil or curtain is a carrier of abstract form. Unstable and fluid it moves the painting back and forth between representation and abstraction and the spectator between within and beyond. Bacon uses it as context to explore indeterminate figuration through a sense of materiality that descends to the gutter. Here figure and ground, animal and human, noble and ignoble become indistinguishable. Behind the curtain, in stage whispers Bacon is talking the language of an abject sublime, an *informe* sublime.

With *Head II* Bacon prioritizes surface over image. While his preference for presenting work under glass demonstrates a desire for material cohesion, Bacon is not interested in a decorative surface or intact pictorial space.⁶⁹ He is not interested in a sense of finish, either in terms of craft or 'complete-ness'. Unlike the resolution of surface in Newman's work, Bacon's painting, and in particular that of the *Head* series, seems inconclusive — abandoned. His method and means are fracture and impoverishment. Within the confines of the intermittently legible initial sketch, his painting is as much a process of removal as it is application. Where Newman's material approach aspired to declare that 'man is present', Bacon's articulated that the artist was. What is eminently visible in *Head II* is a discernable shift towards texture and gesture, towards the business of painting. Where *Head I* was painted on wood with oil and tempera, *Head II* is on coarse raw canvas. Its tooth offers such resistance that the application of paint becomes a more visibly violent process, one of material persuasion and coercion. While Newman preserves a more cohesive painted surface — a certain 'one-ness' to *Onement's* surface — there is violence equal to that found in Bacon's painting in the vertical cadmium tear that cleaves open *Onement I's* unified field of Indian red. While more measured materially than Bacon's visceral imagery, Newman's zip is a scream all the same.

Newman approaches the scream as an abstraction, both figuratively and in material terms, in his *Stations of the Cross* cycle of paintings, begun in 1958 and subsequently completed over an eight-year period. These fourteen works,

while notionally framed by Christ's journey along the Via Dolorosa, account for the intensity of a singular secular experience of physical and spiritual extremis. Newman reconfigures the *Passion* without the church — without what he terms the 'pious legend'.⁷⁰ In this respect the *Passion* becomes an open form, the cry of *Lema* — for what purpose? — becomes existentially driven. Newman writes, 'I wanted to hold the emotion, not waste it in picturesque ecstasies. The cry, the unanswerable cry, is world without end. But painting has to hold it, world without end, in its limits'.⁷¹ Without the obstruction of religious iconography the scream becomes *the nothing* — the fall that defines inner experience in the wake of the 'question that has no answer'. The language Newman uses to articulate this cry is stark in its economy and material candor. He states that 'There would be no beguiling aesthetics to scrutinize'.⁷² The *Stations* paintings employ severely reduced means — color is stripped out and, like Bacon, Newman turns to raw canvas. The statement of the cycle emanates from the plastic challenge itself — from the necessity to paint. He comments that 'When there was a spontaneous, inevitable urge to do them is when I did them'.⁷³

Newman's remark returns us to a sense of obligation articulated by Samuel Beckett in his discussion of the painting of Bram Van Velde with George Duthuit. Beckett states that

The situation is that of him who is helpless, cannot act, in the event cannot paint, since he is obliged to paint. The act is of him who, helpless, unable to act, acts, in the event paints, since he is obliged to paint.⁷⁴

It is the weight of this obligation to express the unrepresentable in the absence of adequate means to do so which unexpectedly finds Newman and Bacon on common ground. Like Melville's monomaniacal Ahab, Newman and Bacon hunt *the whale* — their singular endeavor the search for language, material or otherwise, for the unnamable. It is the torture of this intrinsically and necessarily doomed enterprise that elicits the scream — the scream as expression of the inability to express. A scream which, for Newman, resounds both physically and metaphysically. He likens the experience of such painting

to that of meeting another person, where the initial reaction, physical, immediate and corporeal, is succeeded by what he qualifies as 'meaningful affect' — the consequence of self awareness discovered in the sense of bereft isolation that comes in the wake of a meeting with resonance.

'I wanted to paint the scream more than the horror', comments Bacon.⁷⁵ For him it has little to do with reason or sensational narrative, rather it has to do with the sensation of direct concrete experience. 'Ahab never thinks' writes Melville, 'he only feels, feels, feels'.⁷⁶ Bacon's scream is a manifestation of extreme limit, artistically, spiritually and psychologically. It marks the desire to express, at the point where words fail. Corporeal, the scream is an expulsion — an expletive of base material — that at once fills the silent void, while at the same time exposing powerlessness or paralysis. The violence and abjection of *Head II* testifies to this limit not only in terms of image, in terms of visual motif, but also in terms of material endeavor. The flayed surface of *Head II*, the material language of disruption, characterized by erasive, corrective or cancelling gesture that accounts for figurative presence, exposes the limit of expression and reveals the specter of failure — not necessarily as subject matter, but rather failure as a dynamic state of tension between the mystery of future potential and the predicament of a petrified past. The smeared surface, the corroded image, the raked-over furrows of *Head II* reveals a cannibalistic drive towards an existential *nothingness*, towards a Bataillean state on non-knowledge. Bacon's abject surface evinces the torturous pursuit of such a state. In this respect Bacon's 'material scream' — his plastic drama — reveals despair as an operative mode. He remarks

When things are going badly you will be freer with the way you mess up by just putting paint through the images that you've been making, and you do it with greater abandon than if things have been working for you. And therefore I think, perhaps, that despair is more helpful, because out of despair you may find yourself making the image in a more radical way by taking greater risks.⁷⁷

Such despair reverses the charge between negative and positive poles. The scream is desperate but also provocative — operative. It fuels the violence of

Bacon's gestural language — a plastic, painterly scream that articulates the desire for absolute experience, communicated directly through the mystery and materiality of oil paint. Bataille's conception of the absolute — of inner experience turns on this duality of despair — on the movement between agony and ecstasy. For Bataille there is little to distinguish a scream from the hysterical laugh. He writes

This eye which, to contemplate the sun, face to face in its nudity, opens up to all its glory, does not arise from my reason; it is a cry which escapes me. For at the moment when the lightning stroke blinds me, I am a flash of a broken life, and this life — anguish and vertigo — opening itself up to an infinite void, is ruptured and spends itself all at once in this void.⁷⁸

Bataille's text accompanied a poem by André Masson and the reproduction of his paintings *Aube à Montserrat* and *Paysage aux Prodiges* (1935) in the Parisian surrealist journal '*Minotaure*', edited by André Breton. In these works Masson responds to his experience of agony and ecstasy, of exhilaration and despair — of 'double vertigo' — while lost with his wife, over night, on the treacherous pinnacle of Mount Montserrat. 'The abyss and the sky with shooting stars, the sky itself appeared to me like an abyss', writes Masson, 'something I had never felt before — the vertigo above and the vertigo below'.⁷⁹ As previously discussed, it is to the paintings of André Masson that Carl Einstein turns to expand his theory of painting as language. Masson's visual language emanates from the hysteria inspired by the fall, from a secular experience of the sublime where

Travellers lose their way on a mountain, are present at the death of a star, at its rebirth, descend to a religious place where one appears to celebrate that event and not at all the death of Christ.⁸⁰

As with Newman's *Stations of the Cross*, Masson's experience equates to spirituality in the absence of the church. Newman's paintings celebrate the 'story of each man's agony: the agony that is single, constant, unrelenting, willed — world without end' *and not at all the death of Christ*.⁸¹

Beckett too cites Masson's work in terms of *impoverished painting* — 'here is an artist,' he comments, 'who seems literally skewered on the ferocious dilemma of expression. Yet he continues to wriggle. The void he speaks of is perhaps simply the obliteration of an unbearable presence, unbearable because neither to be wooed nor to be stormed'.⁸² Beckett's rhetoric might also be readily transposed to Bacon, who, like Newman, secularizes religious iconography in the name of inner experience. In this sense the scream that Bacon imposes on *Head VI* (1949) — the last of the Head series and the first of a cycle of studies based on Velasquez's *Pope Innocent X* — is that of the unanswerable cry disassociated from myth and narrative. The cry of Lema is abstracted from the death of Christ and reduced or corroded back to an experience of the butcher's shop counter, to an experience of the corporeal 'glitter and colour' of blood and bone, teeth and saliva.⁸³

In conversation with the Bacon, David Sylvester comments on the painter's 'transformation of the crucified figure into a hanging carcass of meat'.⁸⁴ The scream, as figurative motif and material tactic, corrupts the territories of the sacred and the profane. The dignity of man is made indistinguishable from the base and the beastly. Once again Bacon's obligation to express gives rise to a Batailleian articulation of spirituality, one that refuses to allow for a distinction between man and the animal. Bataille writes

On important occasions human life is still bestially concentrated in the mouth: rage makes men grind their teeth, while terror and atrocious suffering turn the mouth into the organ of rending screams. On this subject it is easy to observe that the overwhelmed individual throws back his head while frenetically stretching his neck in such a way that the mouth becomes, as much as possible, an extension of the spinal column, *in other words, in the position it normally occupies in the constitution of animals*. As if explosive impulses were to spurt directly out of the body through the mouth, in the form of scream.⁸⁵

The experience of the 'overwhelmed individual' is here bound to the precarious abject state initiated by mainstays of the Burkean-sublime, '*terror and atrocious suffering*'.

The profane material surface, experienced directly, served to liberate painting from 'cults' of the past, and sever what Einstein termed the 'convention of the spine' — the petrified language of an overburdened historical and critical narrative. As Noted by Didi-Huberman, this shift from image to surface was determined by a 'dialectic of destruction, or, better, decomposition'.⁸⁶ New forms could only be generated as a result of violent operation that amounted to the 'assassination of other versions'.⁸⁷ Pertinently, from the point of view of Bacon's painting, the figure, as *unity* par excellence in traditional language and aesthetic systems, served, par excellence, as the 'unity to be 'compromised', to 'decompose'.⁸⁸ As Einstein comments

To shake up the figurative world is to call into question the guarantees of our existence. The naïve person believes that the appearance of the human figure is the most trustworthy experience that a human being can have of himself; he dares not doubt this certainty, although he suspects the presence of inner experiences. He imagines that in contrast to this abyss of inner experience the immediate experience of his own body constitutes the most reliable biological unit.⁸⁹

The laborious nature of descriptive, mimetic communication is superseded by something altogether more direct, more sensational. As objects rupture through the action of painting, new un-imagined, prototype forms are revealed across a psychoactive surface and articulated materially. Such painting processes the objective world, not in terms of visual representation, but rather in terms of representing as visual experience the sensation of the unconscious and the real. While Bacon may not be overly interested in painting the absolute, he is entirely concerned with absolute painting.

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- ³ Allon White, 'Prosthetic Gods', *Carnival, hysteria and writing: collected essays and autobiography*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 160
- ⁴ Ibid, p. 161
- ⁵ Bacon in this context is discussed by Richard White in 'Reflections on the scream: Francis Bacon, Lessing, and the aesthetics of the beautiful and the sublime', *Philosophy Today*, Vol 47: 1, (spring 2003) pp. 44-52.
- ⁶ David Mellor, *Figurable: Francis Bacon*, ed. by Achille Bonito Oliva, [exhibition curated by David Sylvester], (Milano: Electa Editrice, 1993), p.97
- ⁷ Ernst van Alphen, *Francis Bacon and the Loss of Self*, (London: Reaktion, 1992), p. 9
- ⁸ John Russell, *Francis Bacon*, (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), pp. 10-11.
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- ¹⁰ Clement Greenberg, 'American Type Painting', *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Vol.3, Affirmations and Refusals, 1950-1956*, ed. by John O'Brian. (University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 98
- ¹¹ Clement Greenberg, *The collected Essays and Criticism. Vol.4, Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*, ed. J. O'Brian, (University of Chicago Press, 1995), p.102
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- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Allon White, 'Prosthetic Gods', *Carnival, hysteria and writing: collected essays and autobiography*, p. 175
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- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Ibid, p. 233
- ²⁰ Philip Shaw, 'Modernism and the Sublime', *The Art of the Sublime*, Tate Research [non-paginated]
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- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Philip Shaw, *The Sublime*, (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 50
- ²⁸ John Russell, *Francis Bacon*, p. 35
- ²⁹ David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), p.18
- ³⁰ George Bataille, 'Encyclopedia Acephalica: Documents of the Avant-Garde. Number 3', *George Bataille and Acephale*, (Atlas Press, 1995), p. 43

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- ³¹ David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, p. 192
- ³² Ibid, p. 172
- ³³ Michel Leiris, *Francis Bacon, Full Face and in Profile*, (Oxford: Phaidon Press Ltd, 1983), p. 40
- ³⁴ Ibid, p. 41
- ³⁵ David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, p. 12
- ³⁶ David Mellor, *Figurable: Francis Bacon*, p. 154
- ³⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness, An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes, (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 627-628
- ³⁸ Ibid, pp. 626-627
- ³⁹ Ibid, p. 629
- ⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 627
- ⁴¹ Ibid, p. 630
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- ⁴³ Ibid, p. 4
- ⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 17
- ⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 12
- ⁴⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness, An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984) p. 777
- ⁴⁷ Philip Shaw cites Robert Rosenblum's 'influential' essay 'The Abstract Sublime' in 'The Modern Sublime', (non-paginated)
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- ⁴⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness, An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, p. 779
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- ⁵² Allon White, 'Prosthetic Gods', *Carnival, hysteria and writing: collected essays and autobiography*, p. 166
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- ⁵⁴ Yve Alain Bois, 'Newman's Laterality', *Reconsidering Barnett Newman*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002) p. 42
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- ⁶³ David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, p. 107
- ⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 85

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- ⁶⁵ Susanne Penn, 'Intuition and Incidents: The Paintings of Barnett Newman' *Reconsidering Barnett Newman*, (Philadelphia, Penn: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2005), pp. 82-95
- ⁶⁶ John Russell, *Francis Bacon*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971)
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 38
- ⁶⁸ Rainer Rumold, 'Painting as a Language, Why Not? Carl Einstein in Documents', *October*, vol. 107 (winter 2004) p. 89
- ⁶⁹ In conversation with David Sylvester Bacon describes his use of glass in terms of creating distance between the onlooker and the object. For Bacon glass helps to unify the painting in the absence of varnish while at the same time enforcing subjectivity in reflections that prevent complete penetration of the work. See D. Sylvester, *Interview with Francis Bacon*, p. 87
- ⁷⁰ *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 188
- ⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 190
- ⁷² *Ibid*.
- ⁷³ *Ibid*.
- ⁷⁴ Samuel Beckett, *Proust & Three Dialogues with George Duthuit*, (London: John Calder Publishers, 1999), p. 119
- ⁷⁵ David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, p. 48
- ⁷⁶ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick or, The Whale*, ed. by Andrew Delbanco and Tom Quirk (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 613
- ⁷⁷ David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, p. 121
- ⁷⁸ George Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 77
- ⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 189
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid*.
- ⁸¹ *Barnett Newman: Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 188
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- ⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p. 46
- ⁸⁵ George Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. by Allan Stoekl, (Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 59
- ⁸⁶ George Didi-Huberman, 'Picture = Rupture: Visual Experience, Form and Symptom according to Carl Einstein', *Papers of Surrealism*, Issue 7, trans. by C. F. B Miller, (2007), p. 2
- ⁸⁷ *Ibid*.
- ⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 3
- ⁸⁹ Carl Einstein, 'Notes sur le cubisme', *Documents* 1, no. 3 (1929), 146 -155, 147, trans. by Charles W. Haxthausen as 'Notes on Cubism', *October* 107, Winter 2004, 158-168, p. 161

THE SMEAR:
PORTRAIT OF THE SUBLIME



Figure. 15 *Leviticus IX*, 2011
(Oil and shellac on RPC, 10 x 9 cm)

Saliva of the Gods: How Paint Moves

'The best way to know a thing is to eat it lick it'. So writes the midcentury, second generation, American Abstract Expressionist painter Sam Francis. *'Zen'* he states *'is found in the saliva of the gods'*. Jean François Lyotard quotes the artist's words in a lyrically reflective commentary on Francis' large-scale work of 1957, *'The Whiteness of the Whale'*.¹ Bodily and base, the glandular secretion is conceived of in terms that invoke Bataille's material spirituality of the low and lurid. As Bataille would have it, *God* is found in saliva — he writes, 'affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit'.² As we have seen, this is the sacred devoid of religious association — a kind of corporeally driven elevation, perhaps reminiscent of the 'strange sort of insanity' that overwhelms Melville's narrator, Ishmael, squeezing, hour after hour, the 'gentle globules of infiltrated tissues', the 'delicious mollifier' that is the unctuous whale spermaceti through his fingers aboard the *Pequod* in *Moby Dick* — a literary source to which Sam Francis alludes in a cycle of paintings known variously as the *Japan Paintings* or the *Sail Paintings* completed in Tokyo during 1957/8. This fleshy succulence, this limber secreted elasticity characterizes physical properties shared by oil paint and the body — both demand tactility, a directness of touch — both expect to be rolled between fingers. According to Lyotard, the painter's hands, 'prepare the fire, they flounder in paste and pigment'.³ While Melville's narrator kneads and works the whale spermaceti until his fingers feel like eels, and begin, 'as it were, to serpentine and spiralise'.⁴ This inversion of the sacred towards the secreted is also evinced in Michel Leiris' writing for *Documents* — where he contributes, along with Marcel Griaule, on the matter of *spittle*. Leiris writes

Spittle is finally, through its inconsistency, its indefinite contours, the relative imprecision of its colour, and its humidity, the very symbol of the formless, of the unverifiable, of the non-hierarchized. It is the limp and sticky stumbling block shattering more efficiently than any stone all undertakings that presuppose man to be something — something other than a flabby, bald animal, something other than the spittle of a raving demiurge, splitting his

sides at having expectorated such a conceited larva: a comical tadpole putting itself up into meat insufflated by a demigod.⁵

At the studio while mixing the heavy, liquorice colour of raw umber and ivory black that makes up the monochrome ground of much of the painting for this research, I find myself reflecting upon the proximity of oil paint to Michel Leiris' conception of spittle. Paint too might serve as something close to the *very symbol of the formless, of the unverifiable, of the non-hierarchized*. Moving the composite of ground earth and bone pigment around the palette with the variably viscous vehicle of stand oil and rectified fir turpentine, the paint gradually reveals its *inconsistency, indefinite contours, the relative imprecision of its colour, and its humidity*. Working the stuff of paint over and over with my palette knife reveals the transparency of the umber substrate under the opacity of the domineering ivory black. Its texture becomes ever more buttery, 'limp and sticky' as more medium is added, until the blade, like Ishmael's fingers, begins to 'serpentine and spiralise', eel-like, through the pigment. The oil paint assumes something of the consistency of slime — 'I open my hands, I want to let go of the slimy and it sticks to me, it draws me, it sucks at me'.⁶ I feel a sense of *continuance* between the oil paint and myself as described by Jean Paul Sartre. 'To touch the slimy is to risk being dissolved in sliminess' he writes.⁷ 'Nothing testifies more clearly to its ambiguous character as a "substance in between two states" than the slowness with which the slimy melts into itself'.⁸ As such oil paint, like spittle — all slipping slime — proposes language in a state of becoming, not yet articulate, but nevertheless communicative. It proposes language in an abject material state.

As Griaule argues, spittle is 'non-hierarchical'; it traverses both the *high* the *low* — it is both 'balm' and 'filth'.⁹ While abject in its corporeal nature, spit, for all its base properties, for all its associations with bodily function, with 'nutrition' and 'secretion', nevertheless also facilitates speech or communication, it is the lubricant of language — the oil that whorls words into the shape of syntax and sentence. It is the material vehicle for both sprayed and spluttered expletive as well as hush-toned homily or delicate dedication. While Leiris may not directly correlate spittle with the actuation of language

itself he does, however, acknowledge a link between the material of the body and that of expression or the articulation of knowledge. Leiris writes, 'what value can we attach to reason, or for that matter speech, and consequently to man's presumed dignity, when we consider that, given the identical source of language and spittle, any philosophical discourse can legitimately be figured by the incongruous image of a spluttering orator' — in other words by the failure of language or the limit of its physical faculty. Being tongue tied or struck dumb is often associated with the anxious paralysis that comes from a 'dry mouth' — from the absence of spittle. In its gummy, globular wetness spit carries faith — faith in language — faith to find the words for what cannot be expressed or described. Spit, Griaule states 'must possess a magical nature because, if it bestows ignominy, it is also a miracle-maker [...] Spittle is soul in movement'.¹⁰

Spittle is not merely vehicle for vocabulary, it is also materially articulate in and of itself. It possesses a kind of material, bodily directness that subverts the hierarchies of knowledge and the word. To spit at another is as immediate form of communication as one can conjure — a gestural form that sees language stray beyond knowing to Kristeva's 'territories of the animal'.

The best way to know a thing is to eat it, lick it. Francis' words suggests a perspective on painting as an unmediated experience, direct, sensorial — absolute — one that turns towards the haptic. We devour with our eyes. 'To eat is to appropriate by destruction;' writes Sartre, 'it is at the same time to be filled up with a certain being'.¹¹ He continues

The sugary, for example, *expresses* the slimy when we eat a spoonful of honey or molasses, just as an analytical function expresses a geometric curve. This means that all qualities which are not strictly speaking flavor but which are massed, melted, buried in the flavor, represent the *matter* of the flavor [...] If I eat a pink cake, the taste of it is pink; the light sugary perfume, the oiliness of the butter cream *are* pink. Thus I eat the pink as I see the sugary.¹²

As Carl Einstein reminds us, seeing is knowledge. Governed by materiality and gesture, such knowledge is orientated by intuition — towards feeling, towards sensation.

Oil paint moves like spit, it smears like slime. It shares a consistency that varies from the opaque to the translucent and a kind of slimy plasticity, a particular malleable fluidity that, like spittle, greases the gears of knowing — it is a medium of or for passing on, it facilitates communication. Paint slips and slides elastically on my palette as I consider its kinetic potential as medium for expression, as material vehicle for alternative forms of communication or rather the communication of alterity. Like spittle, oil paint is *balm* and *filth* — it too is *soul in movement*.

TOWARDS DARKNESS:
PAINTING IN A MINOR KEY

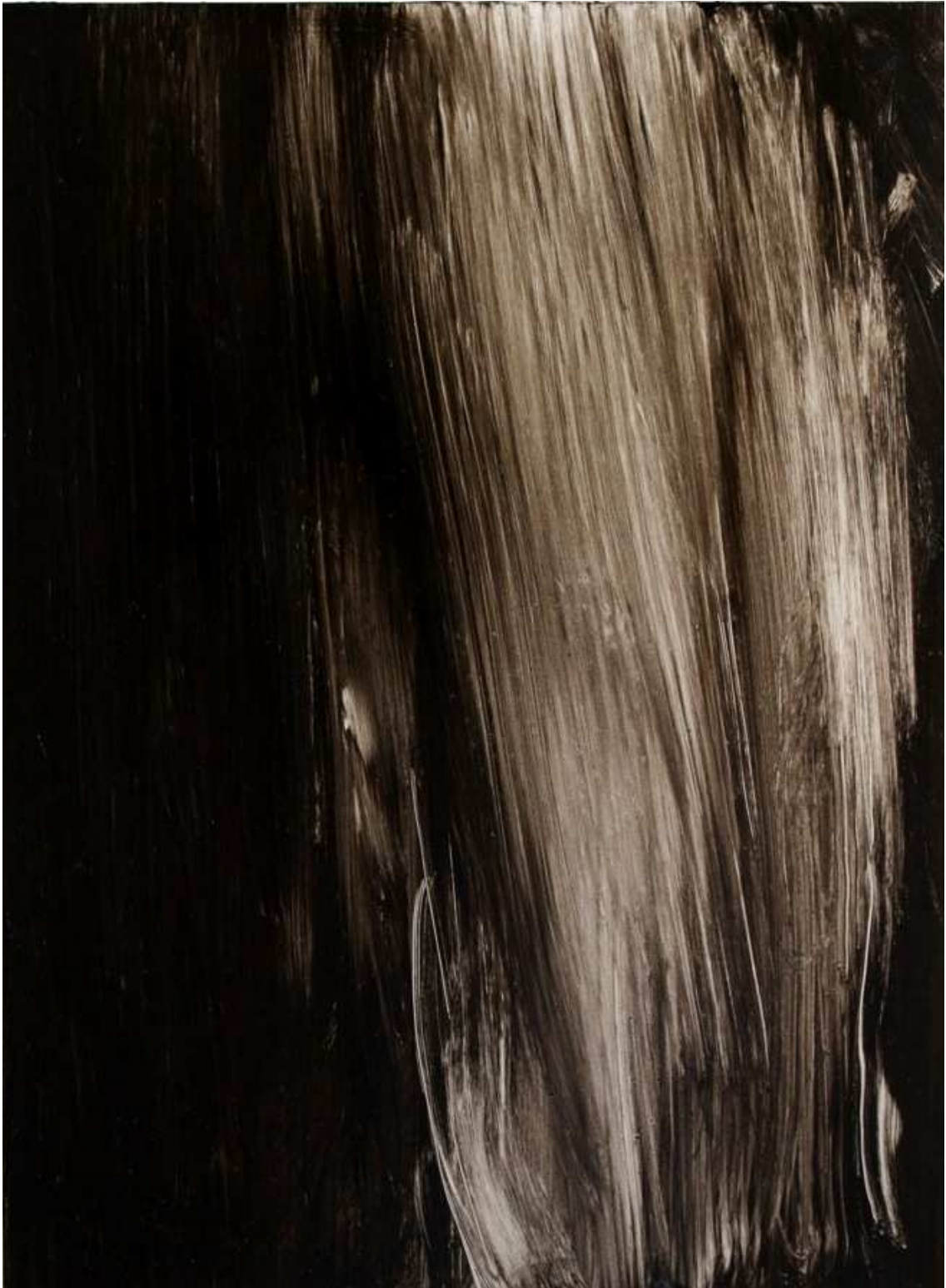


Figure. 16 *Paradigm*, 2011
(Oil on steel 12 x 8 cm)

Bring out all the perfumes of a silence that was hidden in our chatter with visible things, and that we knew nothing about. This is what must be done or permitted to happen; and at the same stroke, allow us to hear just how precarious these delicate polychromies are, that they emanate from a blind void and are going to return to vanish in it, *vanishing Towards Black*.¹³

Studio research has largely been situated against the black monochrome, qualified less in terms of the narrative of Modernism, of the prescribed literature that describes the drive of an inexorable and irresistible essentialism towards a logical and unavoidable formal end point, and more in relation to post-Kantian notions of negative presentation. While there may be tacit affiliation with the twentieth century critical history of the black monochrome as conceptual totem, for the purposes of this project it has been employed as a research tool for the exploration of painting as a felt experience or the experience of feeling in painting.

In this respect it is worth noting a distinction between *blackness* and *darkness*, one that suggests reflection on the privations of Edmund Burke's sublime. While Burke admits that darkness and blackness are in close proximity to one another he argues that there is distinction. Blackness, he writes, is 'but a *partial darkness*' and is 'a more confined idea'.¹⁴ Burke comments that, as absence of colour, blackness is a relative proposition, in as much as it can only be appreciated by an eye 'kept in some degree of tension by the play of adjacent colours upon it'.¹⁵ In this sense blackness is to be viewed — darkness, on the other hand, is sensorial, experiential. In the absence of light the eye is forced to surrender to other senses — to the sensation of the other. The capitulation of the eye to *feeling* is painful. Burke cites darkness as a primal and inherently terrifying state in its capacity to disorientate, destabilize and 'produce a painful sensation'. In darkness, he writes

Whilst the eye remains open, there is a continual *nisus* to receive light; this is manifest from the flashes, and luminous appearances which [...] can be nothing but the effect of spasms, produced by its own efforts in pursuit of its object.¹⁶

This pursuit of object, via a particular subjectivity, has shaped paintings like *Paradigm*, 2011 (Figure. 16). As chromatic matter black, like other colours, is 'an aspect of appearance and so only of the surface'.¹⁷ Chromatic

appearances constitutes the visual logic of the exterior world — how we read the physical domain. However laterally or abstractly employed, colours, like words, carry inherent associative content — the traces of familiar visual organization, the ghosts of narrative/image and the residue of representation. ‘Colour’ writes Ad Reinhardt, ‘sticks in one’s eyes like something caught in one’s throat’.¹⁸ The referent is never far from the surface of colour. Being only ‘partial darkness’, black lingers within the object, within the known.

Darkness, on the other hand, dissolves such taxonomies, such classifications of the familiar into subjectivity, into the unperceivable. This marginal distinction between blackness and darkness is further evinced in the writing of Ad Reinhardt. While it is apparent here that blackness and darkness run into each other, with the terms on occasion interchangeable, there remains a degree of separation — a distance between the two that is, nevertheless, significant. ‘Black, *symbol*’ is the title of one of numerous written pieces Reinhardt composed on the subject. In this stream of consciousness text Reinhardt determines black as sign. He excavates an archeology of symbolic referents and literary associations from ancient myth and the Bible, through Shakespeare to kitsch collisions of good and evil in pop culture. Black under these terms is a proxy, a signal for ‘sin’, ‘vengeance’ and ‘cruelty’.¹⁹ It returns the viewer to the written word — to the constraints of conventional language and literature. In ‘Notes on the Black Paintings’, Reinhardt aligns black with processes of ‘rationalization’, with the categorization of ideas, forms and their narrative — his text loaded with a barrage of ‘isms’. He writes, ‘Ideas, labels, names all have been forced on me, I’ve accepted them’.²⁰

As Burke suggests, black is an idea confined — confined within a well-established cultural narrative that charts frequent appearances across the mediums of writing, painting and sculpture. As Gabriel Ramin Schor has noted in his essay ‘Black Moods’, such appearances stretch as far back as, for example, Robert Fludd’s seventeenth century *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica* (1617), where the black square is presented

as 'nothing less than a representation of the *prima materia*, the beginning of all creation'.²¹ More recent instances might include the black page in Laurence Sterne's key work, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentlemen*, published in 1759; or the banal whimsy of Alphonse Allais's black monochrome print of 1897 (after the poet Paul Bilhaud), *Negroes Fighting in a Cellar at Night*. Later the same year Allais also set a precedent for the sonic monochrome that John Cage would follow half a century or so later, with his *Funeral March for the Obsequies of a Deaf Man*, consisting of nine blank measures. Then, as Ramin Schor comments, some three hundred years after the black square served Fludd's iconography of the infinite, it becomes the totem for radical non-representational painting. In the twentieth century the black monochrome becomes the apex of modernist theory — a theory whose essentialist logic transfigures it from the *beginning of all creation* to nothing less than its pre-determined end. Blackness within twentieth century painting is subsequently bound to 'last paintings' — to the monochromes of Kasimir Malevich (*Black Square on a White Ground*, 1914–15) and Ad Reinhardt (*Abstract Painting*, 1962), to name but two of the painters to have courted blackness during this period.

Such art historical narrative reveals a broad spectrum of agendas affiliated with the black monochrome, and demonstrates its inherently split personality. It has evolved as an entrenched conceptual platform, with work as analytical proposition, while at the same time as expressive means of self-revelation. The monochrome is pure in its emptiness as it is polluted with metaphysical potential and critical force. Like the sublime itself it is by turns empty as it is full — at once the negation of color, the elimination of form, while at the same time presenting formlessness that makes the immaterial tangible. On the one hand it serves as conceptual icon, on the other, icon of the metaphysical. It is the silence that signals the exhaustion of the word — the limit of language — while at the same time being the definitive declaration.

Reinhardt separates darkness from this literary and historical frame of reference. Darkness functions differently — 'No exteriority, partial insights,

sense perception'.²² Darkness, he writes, is 'non-paraphrasable'; in it we 'leave temple images behind'. The dark is 'pure non-being' — where 'all distinctions disappear'. It is by a 'luminous darkness [...] we know the unknowable'.²³ Aware of the paradox of using the written word to conjure the indescribable Reinhardt makes clear the limits of language in relation to painting and darkness. He states, 'How can a thing be described which has no description but itself'.²⁴ Where blackness equates to negation as concept, darkness constitutes a kind of metaphysical negation — negation, that is, of the self. In the wake of the cannibalistic essentialism that left modernism in the critical cul-de-sac of minimalism, the black monochrome has arguably been reclaimed in the name of metaphysical negation — in the name of darkness — by contemporary artists like Miraslaw Balka (*How it Is*, 2009), Jason Martin (*Qaaba*, 2011) and Richard Serra (*Elevational Weight, Black Matter*, 2010). *Paradigm* (Figure. 16) privileges *sense perception* over cognition, conception over the conceptual — the dark over black.

Beyond any theoretical and critical associations, from a practical point of view, the monochrome provides an effective ground from which to produce image through extraction and subtraction. Stripped of color, tone and pictorial structure the black monochrome is a kind of non-painting, whose economy enabled me to contrast opposite conventions such as abstraction/representation, whole/fragment, form/formlessness, figure/ground, control/accident and presence/absence.

By stripping my painting of *chromatic appearances* and, therefore, the referents that obediently follow, a work like *Paradigm* is reduced to a kind of binary language. Zero or one — mark or no mark — flatness or depth. While not a direct evocation of the black monochrome, nevertheless, *Paradigm* alludes to a sense of the negative carried in that history. The black monochrome constitutes the turning out of the visible in painting in favour of direct physical sensation experienced visually. In the absence of colour materiality makes its presence felt. The black monochrome is not for reading; blankness subsumes its literature — the monochrome is for feeling.

Such an approach emanates from nothing — from the ground-zero of charred relics and decomposing artifacts of a painting practice left devastated by fire. It emanates from the silence of ashes — from being left speechless literally and artistically in the face a particular kind of ‘loss of self’. It emanates from the ‘blind void’ found at the limit of visual language. This particular nothingness provoked the re-evaluation of my practice as a painter, re-orientating it from narrative forms — or what Lyotard terms the ‘chatter of visible’ things — towards the figure/ground relationship, towards painting as a felt experience. In so doing my practice has developed as something of a destructive business, with negation and abjection privileged in relation to the possibility of an expansion of the material language of the sublime, *vanishing Towards Black*.

Though in no way comparable, this research is in some sense a response to catastrophe in the same way that mid-twentieth century abstraction in painting was a response to the artistic and moral crisis precipitated by global conflict and the exhaustion of cubist and representational modes of art. In this respect I faced the same paralyzingly succinct question that confronted postwar painters and gave common ground to artists as apparently diverse as Barnett Newman and Francis Bacon. That question being — *what to paint?* As previously argued, the socio/cultural and political backdrop of a tumultuous contemporary period might legitimately draw comparison to the postwar period.

Then, as now, ‘the world was going to pot’.²⁵ Lyotard asks, ‘What could one paint except the spleen that comes from those floods’.²⁶ Such unsettling current conditions have contributed to a new ‘age of anxiety’ and provoked a return to subjectivity discernible in the numerous recent exhibitions concerned with the sublime.²⁷ While such macro pressures may contribute to a climate my practice cannot help but be subliminally sensitive to, the development of my painting towards negation is a response to a personal point of crisis, a response to negative experience. The drift towards interiority and its expression has been determined by a need for subject matter after the ‘bric-a-

brac' of the external world has been blistered and burned, leaving the abstract and the abject — 'a different subject matter that the painting itself entails, that the painting itself projects'.²⁸ This shift marks a turn in visual language from narrative, from *literature*, burdened with associative forms — to the intuitive. In this sense, descriptive or illustrative forms, indirect and *slow* are superseded by those of gesture, which function as forms of inscription — direct, like speech — *fast* in their formlessness. In privileging gesture and mark my practice swapped the concrete shoes of representation for the fleet of foot presence of presentation.

The physical procedures of expression, the push and pull of trial and error embodied in the material surface testify to work, to the slavish sense of duty that fuels the drive to express despite the inevitable failure to do so. Each painting eventually and unavoidably comes up against limit. In the end subjectivity defines and insists upon a threshold of belief and confidence, beyond which the mirage dissolves and the apparition vanishes, leaving a 'symptom picture' of the desire to paint.²⁹

This is the purgatory of obligation as described by Samuel Beckett — the obligation to express despite the impossibility to do so. Lyotard comments 'The process of painting is one of devotion'.³⁰ Devotion is often said to be blind. This is the paradox of a blindness that sees — of vision beyond or through the impenetrable darkness of the unknowable. Lyotard differentiates between *seeing* and *looking*. 'I'm not saying that you are going to see' he writes, 'but, if God wills it, you are perhaps going to stop *looking*'.³¹ *Looking* seduces the viewer with the hullabaloo of colour and image. *Seeing*, however, is blind to such bedazzling spectacle. *Seeing*, Lyotard writes, is the 'hoped-for deliverance of the *gaze* stretched out beyond what it sees'.³² In darkness we are forced to abandon ourselves to sensation alone; we feel our way — there is no 'point of view'. Boundaries fail — the exterior threshold between darkness and ourselves corrodes to the point at which we are indistinguishable from the *other* — from the abject itself. Without physical topography the self is forced beyond its limit. We grope and stumble through discomfiting inquietude. In painting, gesture is this seeing blindness, this

second-sight that 'compels the eye to become the hand and the hand to become the eye, in order to see and above all in order not to look'.³³

Gesture is physical probing; a bodily movement materially inscribed that alludes to both uncertainty and conviction and 'pays homage to the visible marvel and bears witness to the visual enigma'.³⁴ Devotion is made concrete in and through gesture, in the physical votive act; its material nuance evidence of faith — in spite of reason— that reveals the internal structures of a visual experience that testifies to a kind of spectacle of nothing-ness, to darkness as limit. It proposes the possibility of articulation, all the while spelling out the opposite. The Batailleian torture of this impasse, signaled with the painterly gesture, and in particular the erasive or cancelling gesture, is what Lyotard phrases 'the lesson of darkness'.³⁵

TOWARDS ABJECTION:
FIGURING THE SMEAR



Figure. 17 *Study II*, 2011
(Oil on steel, 12 x 16 cm)

It ought to do nothing to you other than dislodge you. Make your gaze and your words abdicate. It is not painting, images. It is not for looking at and commenting on. It's painting. You won't have to show how it's made and how it's seen. He paints so that we would be thirsty. It's the whale. You can't look at it, it's what makes you see. You think it wants something from you, that it's stringing you along, making fun of you. You think it wants you to follow it. That it wants you to harpoon it. But it wants nothing from you — it is your thirst. Lie down, wait immobile, suckle. It is not something, drink. Give it your gesture, without object or subject.³⁶

To see is to witness — to experience — to be present. Corrosion, on the other hand, speaks of absence, loss and diminishment. As an unstoppable, visible articulation of time relentlessly unfolding, the fragmentation or disintegration that corrosion produces is violent. And where beauty channels serenity and the whole, the sublime is nothing without violence and fracture. Archival photographic portraits like those used in the *Leviticus* series (Figure.15 - p. 115) of works provided source material for a series of improvisational paintings that sought to reduce the figure in portrait to a subjective, metaphysical encounter of something wholly other, an encounter of the portrait presented negatively — as missing contents. Painted during 2011, *Study II* (Figure. 17) proved to be a key work in this series and in the development of the studio research on the whole.

It marks a drive towards absolute economy or the economy of the absolute, towards figuration as a process of reduction — as negation, both pictorially and materially. In this sense *Study II* constitutes something of a *lesson in darkness*. It describes a tectonic shift within my working methods. The steady and meticulously thought out accumulation of volume and tone with glazes over a grisaille compositional under-painting is superseded by process reduced to subtraction. It marks the turn from *looking* to *seeing* — from exteriority to interiority, from image in painting to the image of painting, to the procedures of expression as material language. The singularity of *Study II*, its material economy and the directness of expressive gesture — the paucity of referents and compositional structure — equates to an experiment in painting as sensation, whereby immediate, unmediated experience of the action of expression bypasses the default setting of representation or cognitive processing. The figure traverses the boundary between familiarity and estrangement.

The point of departure for *Study II* is material rather than pictorial. Each painting begins with the process of laying down a uniform ground of ivory black and raw umber from which a subjective immaterial figurative presence is then dragged, cut or smeared. The matter for this ground might be considered

base. The body of this darkness is composed of the decomposed — ivory black, or impure-carbon, being a pigment produced through the charring of animal bones and raw umber being an earth pigment drawn from the sediment of iron oxide and manganese oxide. These remains are reanimated in and through the painter's medium — a 'superconductor' of stand-oil and rectified turpentine. The term 'medium' is malleable, relating both to the material and the immaterial, the physical and the metaphysical. As vehicle 'medium' conducts the physical properties of pigment — the painter's medium actuates linguistic potential, it enables a textural syntax of traction, and movement. 'Medium' also relates to clairvoyance — a kind of second sight beyond the limits of the visible. Whisking up the viscous juju soup of oils, spirits and charred bone-dust there is something of the voodoo in the process of painting — a kind of spirituality of the base. The ground is not black, it is not idea — it is not the concept of 'last', nor flatness conceived, rather it is the base materiality of depth — the rust and bone of darkness.

Under these conditions the figure is implied rather than literalized, it is the feeling of figuration in the absence of its form — a residual presence, suggested in the portrait aspect of the aluminum support and the seventeenth century-like darkness from which it emerges. The figure is reduced to a single gesture, to the nothingness of the downward smear of a medium soaked rag through oil paint on metal. The painting of the work is privileged above image, the means above the end. While the tenor of archival photographic sources perhaps lingers in the perceptual periphery, *Study II* marks the development of chance and intuition as working method — an intuition bound to the plastic reality of materials employed.

Study II explores feeling, not just in terms of atmosphere — the projected timbre or tone of the work — but also in relation to the physical *feeling* of painting itself in terms of procedures and techniques. By this I mean how paint literally feels between and under the fingers, and how, subsequently, at the point of contact between support and painter's hand, those material conditions effect gesture and the nature of mark making. Painted on aluminium, both *Paradigm* and *Study II* are examples of an increasing use of metal supports

within my practice. As gesture became central to the research so the *speed* of painting surface became more important. Where the tooth of primed canvas or the grain of wooden panel offers inevitable resistance that restricts gesture or slows the subtractive mark, unprimed metal supports provide a fast unyielding surface that offers kinetically charged contact between brush, rag, finger and support, allowing the subtractive mark to run on. Metal surfaces also offer significant durability to some of the more corrosive procedures increasingly involved in my painting. Such violent physical processes variously include abrasion, scraping, scoring and carving — using glass papers, knives and solvent soaked rags — reductive methods that in some sense could be considered sculptural.

Over the course of the research a variety of metals have been experimented with, ranging from the relative warmth or softness of aluminium to the cold truculence of stainless steel. Used unprimed, the variety of industrially produced finishes available in these metals allowed for incredibly versatile surfaces that offered on the one hand reflective depth and on the other a mute, burnished flatness, depending on finish and painting technique applied. While early examples within the project also include the use of mild-steel, which provides an unstable ‘live’ surface that remains susceptible to oxidization or corrosion even after sizing with either shellac varnish or acrylic primer, the research ultimately focused less on how paint reacts and more on how it moves. As the project progressed it was the grain-less rigidity, the absolute flatness of stainless steel that proved most materially appropriate for the development of a particular language of abjection in relation to painting and the sublime. Its frictionless surface allowing for a more fluid, responsive working process as image develops. Here marks made remain resilient, more autonomous, producing a richer vocabulary from which to articulate, ‘a sense of being teetering on the edge of nothingness’ to use Phillip Shaw’s words.³⁷

Such a tipping point might be defined as movement — typically downward — from a state of equilibrium to one of collapse. Like corrosion, this entropic movement witness’s one state transformed to another, form to formless. The

smear is this tipping point, constituting a visual language of or for decomposition. It too is movement — tracing the capitulation of material to disruptive force, the operative force of Bataille's *informe* — qualified by George Did-Huberman as a 'certain power that forms have to deform themselves constantly, to pass quickly from the like to unlike'.³⁸ The smear makes manifest this destabilizing pulse, this catastrophic slip that represses the figure, sublimating it through abstraction — the object of desire perpetually divorced from its expression. 'All this', Bataille writes 'leads one to say that the summit of elevation is in practice confused with a sudden fall of unheard-of violence'.³⁹ The smear constitutes this 'sudden fall' — it entangles previously disparate and autonomous compositional elements, violently dragging the qualified and the legible into a zone of indeterminacy. It is here the dynamics of the visual encounter are fundamentally altered. Here, without the traction afforded by representation, the eye is unable to settle — no sooner has the image coalesced than it collapses back into darkness. The eye is deprived of pictorial specificity and is instead confronted with a generality or totality that cannot be readily contained by *literature* — by the written word.

The eye orientates itself towards nothing — *nothing* but painting — its procedures and performance exposed by the stark economy of means, by the singularity of gestural intervention, by how the paint moves. 'The gaze', writes Lyotard, 'finds itself stripped of its separative power'.⁴⁰ Narrative of image is superseded by surface narrative — impression (mimesis) is superseded by expression. The smear is a symptom of what Bataille describes as the 'search for that which most ruptures elevation, and for a blinding brilliance'; a search that he suggests 'has a share in the elaboration or decomposition of forms'.⁴¹ The smear is a symptom of the desire to *see* — as such it has little to do with looking and, like all symptoms, is a felt experience.

The smear of *Study II* sets the figure/ground relationship at tension. The boundaries between the two territories become porous. The smear tears open the closed form of the monochrome. The viewer is confronted with a bodily

presence, which refuses to reveal the entirety of the figure. The smear traces the desire for figuration in the absence of the means to deliver it — leaving in its wake the provisional and contingent. Its form, or rather formlessness, is arbitrary. The screwed up rags used vary from the soft and clean to the sharp edged, sticky and paint caked. The mark is made blind, under rag — beneath textual variation that militates against control beyond the general downward draw of the rag. The physical contact between the painting and myself is determined yet unreliable. I am unable to legislate the outcome once the gesture has begun. It remains uncertain despite intent and desire; its integrity dependent upon on a singularity of purpose, upon an autonomy derived from unpredictability, from the unknown. It is a leveling force. One that returns the viewer to what existed, as Julia Kristeva describes, ‘in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be’.⁴² As a painterly gesture it privileges lowness over elevation, the horizontal over the vertical — the dragging down of the pictorial, the grinding of the figure into its constituent parts. The smear imitates nothing — it undoes representation, leaving a presentation of *nothingness* intact between the oppositely charged poles of subject and object. In the smear “subject’ and ‘object’ push each other away, confront each other, collapse and start again — inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject’.⁴³

For Kristeva abjection — the fluctuating non-state between object and subject, between body and psyche — is ‘edged with the sublime’.⁴⁴ This borderline state, this state of becoming Kristeva likens to a ‘symptom’. In it, she writes, ‘the abject permeates me, I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control’.⁴⁵ She continues, ‘the sublime object dissolves in the raptures of a bottomless memory’.⁴⁶ Kristeva’s development of Bataille’s project of ‘linking the sacred to horrific powers of impurity’ is anchored to a psychoanalytical framework — to the theory of the unconscious.⁴⁷ Consequently, any such experience is dependent upon the literature associated with repression. Kristeva argues that

Not at all short of but always with and through perception and words, the sublime is a *something added* that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both *here*, as dejects, and *there*, as others and sparkling. A divergence, an impossible bounding. Everything missed, joy — fascination.⁴⁸

This framework remains largely interpretational. Reliant on the signification of forms, perception under these terms is shackled to memory and the language of commentary — to the institution of analysis and meaning. As such ‘this focus on significant forms is only the prolegomena to a more essential step of the descent towards darkness’ — towards the essential, first hand encounter of the divergence of self between limit and the other side.⁴⁹ Such interpretive discourse remains distinct from and secondary to the direct experience of an abject sublime. Sublimation, Kristeva reminds us, ‘is nothing else than the possibility of naming the pre-nominal, the pre-objectal’.⁵⁰ Thus conceived, sublimation provides cognitive apparatus, the means by which to *control* the self in the face of abjection via tactics of association, memory and strategies of repression. The complexities of such signification, meaning and logic qualify as discourse *on* abjection and its relationship to the sublime.

In contrast, the gesture of the smear returns us to Bataille’s statement that ‘A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus *formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world’.⁵¹ In this sense the smear is a phrase whose visual inflections and rhythms are tasked with the severing of memory; the smear is the action of abjection. Such an ‘instant’, writes Lyotard, ‘belongs to no history, and the work does not progress. The gesture multiplies openings’.⁵² It is discourse *of* a sublime that we find at the bottom of the descent — a sublime corrupted with the coarse and caustic.

TOWARDS THE HAPTIC:
INTUITION AND IMPOSSIBILITY



Figure. 18 *Untitled*, 2012,
(Oil on steel, 50 x 50 cm)

You have to hold the thing very tight because it has only one thing on its mind, and that is to get away from you. It always does the following: runs out in front of you and offers itself to your delighted eyes. Makes itself pretty. Appears to you, struts, parades before your eyes, and then vanishes. And after that, having survived, Ulysses, you'll be able to write down the feelings she inspired in you. Easy to guess, "You were captivated but you got away." Since you can talk about it. You'll go back after it — Whereas he says to you: stop yourself moving, no distance, suck its ambergris directly, lie on top of it, it mustn't stand before you.⁵³

Study II, in some respects, happened too early in the research. The singularity of the work, the immediacy of gesture, the stark economy of the figure (specifically, in portrait) presented as missing contents, as the figure negated through something as base as a smear, with all the connotations of the viscera of the body, proved a problematic form for the research in both practical and conceptual terms.

Practically speaking the vocabulary of *Study II* is determined by scale. Much of the early painting for the project is intimate — in marked contrast with the immersive, Newman-esque dimensions traditionally associated with an experience of the sublime in painting. Mounted several inches clear of the wall, *Study II* floats creating a certain spatial ambiguity that triggers a loss of confidence as the spectator experiences an isolating and ultimately subjective encounter of something that has an ambivalent physical presence. By drawing the viewer as close as possible to the surface of the painting the materiality of gesture, the sensation of the smear is unavoidable. On this intimate and discrete scale the drag of a hand-held rag composes a gestural syntax that obfuscates detail within a singular broad phrase.

Having seen the potential of this language writ large, projected (Figure. 19) whilst presenting a symposium paper, I began to increase the scale of my painting. However, such economy of gesture, such intimacy of intuition failed to readily translate to a larger format. Gestural terms narrowed and became descriptive rather than affective. Larger formats proved unable to sustain the gestural directness feasible on a small scale. In simple terms, a single expressive mark fails to occupy compositional space in the same way on a larger support. Structurally speaking, as scale increases, so the language of gesture and mark shifts from the macro to micro, from the broad and open towards something more literally minded, something more consolidated — something that insists on more painting.



Figure. 19 *Study II* projected, RNUAL symposium paper, July 2011

The challenge that works like *Study II* presented was how to maintain the intimacy and immediacy of gesture on a larger scale without being forced to employ a more mechanically produced language, like that of, for example Gerhard Richter.⁵⁴ Such methods, such *tools* — squeegees, brooms, and other coopted utensils — result in a kind of ambivalent materiality, orientated towards process, towards object-ness, rather than the immaterial — the subject-ness of expression. The degree of separation between the painter's hand and the working surface signals a kind of abdication to mediation, to mechanical procedure. Consequently, the language of the arbitrary overwhelms that of intuition. Directness stalls, immediacy waylaid in the deliberateness of the assisted mark. As Sartre comments, 'Immediacy is the absence of any mediator'.⁵⁵

From a conceptual or theoretical perspective the near binary visual language of *Study II* proved impossible to retrieve or replicate, even on a discrete scale. This economy, whereby the figure is reduced to such meager means marks out a no-mans-land between subject and object, between the known and the unknowable — between the *inner* and *outer*. The figure is unable to rid itself entirely of the ground from which it emanates, being constantly dragged back

down into it like the *wasp which sinks into the jam and drowns in it*. At the same time, the ground fails to assert authority, losing traction in the back-and-forth between states. Sartre writes, 'To be sure, the separation between two discontinuous elements is an emptiness — ie, a nothing — but it is a *realized* nothing'.⁵⁶ *Study II* offers, prematurely in relation to the development of the research, the possibility that such a 'substantialized nothing' might also be found in a fusion that dissolves boundaries, in a corrosion that de-classifies categories, in the abjection of *discontinuous elements* into an indeterminate state of interiority — inherently unstable. In this sense, the smear is a visual phrase that carries with it the possibility of material and metaphysical annihilation and the threat of an irresistible return of the figure/body to the darkness of the absolute, to the nothingness of primordial matter.

Study II is an agonizingly concise statement that invokes a *sense of being teetering on the edge of nothingness*, located between the abstraction of the figure and abstraction *as* figure. The desire for representation and the literary institution that accompanies it is literally wiped away in the dragged painterly gesture. It silences the *chatter of visible things*. The memory of the figure is repressed — sublimated with a smear. The smear equates not just to negation but also to *sabotage*. The symbolic order, the 'intellectual scaffolding' of interpretational discourse is upended with a gesture that refuses to accommodate the practice of decoding visual signs and instead insists upon itself as sign of visual experience. The smear blinds, that seeing might be made conscious of the materiality of gesture, of the presence of painting.

Study II left in its wake a series of paintings in which the pursuit of its particular gestural efficacy resulted in the contrivance of accident and imitation of intuition. Works like *Loss of Other Modalities of Sensation X and III* (Figure. 20, 21), which further explore the abstraction of the figure, reveal the difficulties experienced in responding formally to *Study II*, to a painting that offers a figurative statement that cannot be further distilled or reduced.

Increasing the support size in the *Loss of Other Modalities of Sensation* series increased the need for more painting — for a more complex presentation.



Figure. 20 *Loss of Other Modalities of Sensation X*, 2011
(Oil on steel 50 x 50 cm)



Figure. 21 *Loss of Other Modalities of Sensation III*, 2011
(Oil on steel 50 x 50 cm)

Compositional structure could not be sustained with a single gesture. Though the process of making remained largely the same in these paintings, with figurative archeology extracted from the geology of the monochrome, the necessity for a broader, more expansive visual vocabulary resulted in gesture that is imitative. While the head remains characterized by a certain *provisionality*, by a material contingency, the vocabulary of abjection is here dependent upon intuition *described* rather than its actual activation. Loose, slashing brush strokes paint the appearance of the smear rather than the smear appearing through the painting of the work. In this respect, from the perspective of the painter and not necessarily that of the spectator, *Loss of Other Modalities of Sensation X, III* present painterly brush marks that memorialize an other passed into familiarity at the very moment of its appearance. ‘You were captivated but you got away’ Lyotard writes — the sublime is subject to the law of diminishing returns, the abject to material sincerity.⁵⁷ If not fake as such, retaining as they do an expressive integrity in their physical production, the brush marks in the *Loss of Other Modalities of Sensation* paintings, nevertheless, can be seen as appropriative. They go after the immediacy of *Study II*’s formal means, but come up short — bogged down in the slow process of painting *fastness*.

In a recent essay, ‘Statements of Intent’, Mark Godfrey discusses the issue of authenticity and gesture in relation to symptoms of expression in the painting of, amongst others, contemporary artists Charlene Von Heyl and Jacqueline Humphries.⁵⁸ Like Raphael Rubinstein, Godfrey alludes to a renewed sense of impossibility in and of painting as spur to a current of gestural abstraction discernible within recent work. The territory for this kind of painting, Godfrey notes, has become ever more destabilized as mid-century associations have fused with post-modern parodies. Gesture is once again affiliated to a language of the unknown — an unknown recalibrated within contemporary ideas of subjectivity, limit and materiality. Godfrey writes

these painters, then, in their different ways, have departed from the authentic gesture of midcentury *and* the emptied postmodern gesture. Instead their canvases are populated by uncertain, fake, or unlocatable gestures. And

where we do find “real” drips or passages of firm brushwork, we find it impossible to read them as we once did. Meaning is thrown back onto the viewer as the artists’ own subjective investments in their decisions around paint handling become indeterminate and unknowable.⁵⁹

While Godfrey argues that the *unknowability* at the foundations of this painting is disentangled from the strategies of non-composition that shaped modernism, negation nevertheless is detectable in the language of de-composition he reports on. Such painting turns on tactics of violation or corruption. Godfrey quotes Humphries who states, ‘I have to destroy the painting I know to make the one I don’t yet’.⁶⁰ Scratch the surface of Von Heyl’s fastidiously delivered drips or Humphries’ vigorous ‘impromptu doodles’ and sincerity is revealed — a faith in an interior experience of ‘material surfaces seen in real space’.⁶¹ Post-pastiche (post-irony), the fake is no longer discernible from the real. ‘At the core of my being in the world, and my being as an artist’, comments Von Heyl, ‘is this sense of falseness, which feels paradoxically like the one truly existential sense of self left, or possible. And it is this paradoxical twist that gives me a new lease on pathos’.⁶²

Behind strategies of appropriated gesture is the ever-present existential crisis in the desire to express without the means with which to do so — or perhaps more appropriately from a contemporary perspective, the crisis in the desire to express while overwhelmed by the infinite expansion of means to do so. Behind the fake expressive mark is the sincere expression of the fear of nothingness experienced in the confrontation with the blank canvas, in facing the ‘vertiginous uncertainty of just starting off’.⁶³

This *just starting off* returns us to Lyotard’s conception of the *Now* of the sublime — that point of tension and transition between the all-devouring dark of nothingness and something other, something like the figure of gesture. Perhaps channeling Beckett, Lyotard associates this anxiety with waiting. He situates it in the traumatic possibility of nothing happening. The feeling at such a point is contradictory. Loaded as it is with both dread and giddy anticipation it equates to something like the eternal torture experienced by Beckett’s

characters Estragon and Vladimir in his play *Waiting for Godot*. Wandering the postmodern limbo of worn out essentialism and the absurdity of articulating the un-presentable, the painter declares with the first mark made 'We're saved!' only for the torment of paralysis to be immediately reinstated, as the very same gesture subsequently insists 'Nothing to be done'. As Lyotard comments, misery accompanies not just the starting off, but 'every point of questioning', every 'and what now?' — or, in respect to *Study II*, every point that asks 'is this it?' or 'is this enough?' ⁶⁴

As such painterly gesture relates to what Lyotard describes as a 'Letting go of all grasping intelligence and of its power, disarming it, recognizing that this occurrence of painting was not necessary and is scarcely foreseeable'. ⁶⁵ Such a *letting go* is a surrendering to intuition, to (visual) knowledge gained not by reason and perception but instead by instinct, by belief — by feeling. Sartre comments that 'Intuition has often been defined as the immediate presence of the known to the knower'. ⁶⁶ This immediate knowledge, in relation to painting, is visual language that manifests the presence of the immediate. Consequently it is the unknown to which the knower (painter) orientates — an intuition guided towards forms of the unconscious by accident, chance and material conditions. In this sense, gesture is the engine of intuition.

Despite the apparent impossibility of adequate expressive means to present the inexpressible the *event* of gesture happens — it just starts off. The surface is marked, and in that first instance the mark is abstract. It presents the possibility of something other than silence. The mark presents the potential of gestural language at the point words fail. In the *Loss of Other Modalities of Sensation X* and *III* just starting off is an action compromised — *vertiginous uncertainty* coming not from the emptiness of the point of departure, but instead from the confrontation with the fullness of what has passed before, with the material immediacy achieved previously in *Study II*. In this sense the difficulty of *just starting off* in the *Loss of Other Modalities of Sensation* works was the conflict between the premeditated and the unexpected, the known and the unknown. The challenge was, as it were, to paint over *Study II*.

Where *Study II* was begun with a gesture that proposed the figure, *Loss of Other Modalities of Sensation X, III* offers figuration that proposes gesture. Reflecting on this differential studio research subsequently developed into two distinct lines of enquiry — on the one hand an exploration of the abstraction of the figure and on the other an investigation of figure as abstraction.

¹ Jean François Lyotard, 'The Whiteness of the Whale' (painting 30), *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington, ed. by Herman Parret, (Venice CA: Lapis Press, 1993), [non-paginated—commentaries follow paintings catalogued 1-43]

² George Bataille, *Visions of Excess Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, edited and trans. by Allan Stoekl, (Manchester University Press, 1985), p. 30

³ Jean François Lyotard, 'Sulphurs, 1979' (Painting 23), *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness*

⁴ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick or, The Whale*, ed. by Andrew Delbanco and Tom Quirk (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 455

⁵ Michel Leiris, 'Mouth Water', *Critical Dictionary, Encyclopedia Acephalica*, (London: Atlas Press, 1995), p. 80

⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness, An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984), p. 766

⁷ Ibid, p. 777

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Marcel Griaule, 'Spittle', *Critical Dictionary, Encyclopedia Acephalica*, p. 79

¹⁰ Michel Leiris, 'Spittle—2: Mouth Water', *Critical Dictionary, Encyclopedia Acephalica*, p. 81

¹¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness, An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, p. 783

¹² Ibid, p 784

¹³ Jean François Lyotard, 'Towards Black' (painting 3). *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness*

¹⁴ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. by David Womersley, (London: Penguin Group, 2004), p. 175

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 174

¹⁷ Ad Reinhardt, *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. by Barbara Rose, (New York: Viking Press, 1975), p. 97

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 97

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 96

²⁰ Ibid, p. 103

²¹ Gabriel Ramin Schor, 'Black Moods', *Tate Etc.*, issue 7, (summer 2006), accessed online at www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/black-moods [non-paginated]

²² Ad Reinhardt, *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, p. 90

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- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ *Barnett Newman: selected writings and interviews*, ed. by John p. O'Neill, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990) p. 304
- ²⁶ Jean François Lyotard, 'Saturated Blue, 1953', *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness* (painting 1)
- ²⁷ As noted in previous chapters Simon Morley charts a good number of recent exhibitions concerned with the sublime.
- ²⁸ Barnett Newman used the term 'bric-a-brac' to describe the associative visual references of traditional painting that had 'been reduced to a kind of folklore' and were subsequently to be cleared out through a turn to subjectivity and interiority of abstraction. *Barnett Newman: selected writings and interviews*, p. 303
- ²⁹ Jean François Lyotard, *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness*, p. 22
- ³⁰ Jean François Lyotard, 'Bright and Fast, 1981', *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness*, (painting 18)
- ³¹ Ibid, *The Whiteness of the Whale* (painting 30)
- ³² Jean Francois Lyotard, *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness*, p. 30
- ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Ibid, 'Mother Blue, 1974', *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness*, (painting 20)
- ³⁵ Lyotard makes use of the phrase *lesson of darkness* frequently throughout his poetic commentary on the painting of Sam Francis.
- ³⁶ Jean François Lyotard, 'Moby Dick, 1958', *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness*, (painting 32)
- ³⁷ Philip Shaw, *The Sublime*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), p. 122
- ³⁸ George Didi Huberman as cited by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A Users Guide*, (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p. 80
- ³⁹ George Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-39*, p. 58
- ⁴⁰ Jean François Lyotard, 'Not All I See Is There, 1969', *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness*, (painting 13)
- ⁴¹ Ibid.
- ⁴² Julia Kristeva, 'Approaching Abjection, Powers of Horror', *The Sublime*, ed. by Simon Morley, (London: Whitechapel Gallery & MIT Press), 2010, p. 161
- ⁴³ Ibid, p. 167
- ⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 162
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 163
- ⁴⁷ Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A Users Guide*, p. 237
- ⁴⁸ Julia Kristeva, 'Approaching Abjection, Powers of Horror', p. 163
- ⁴⁹ Jean François Lyotard, *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness*, p. 29
- ⁵⁰ Julia Kristeva, 'Approaching Abjection, Powers of Horror', p. 163
- ⁵¹ George Bataille, *Visions of Excess Selected Writings, 1927-1939* p.31
- ⁵² Jean François Lyotard, 'Untitled, 1989', *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness*, (painting 29)
- ⁵³ Ibid, 'Ahab, 1962', (painting 31)
- ⁵⁴ I'm thinking of here Richter's ongoing series *Abstract Paintings* that date roughly from the mid 1980's to the present. In these paintings heavy layers of paint are smeared through and across each other with a screen-printing

'squeegee'. While arguably these works channel something of the abject in their mottled, mucousy, membrane-like surfaces, there is a mechanical ambivalence to the gesture that seems more demonstration than presentation.

⁵⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes, (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 201

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ Jean François Lyotard, 'Ahab, 1962', *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness*, (painting 31)

⁵⁸ Mark Godfrey, 'Statements of Intent', *Artforum*, (May 2014), pp. 297-303

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 298

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 299

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 302

⁶² Ibid, p. 298

⁶³ Ibid, p. 298

⁶⁴ Jean François Lyotard, 'The Sublime and the Avant Garde', *The Sublime*, ed. by Simon Morley, (London: Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2010), p. 29

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 30

⁶⁶ Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, p. 201

OTHER CATASTROPHES

TOWARDS THE HAPTIC:
THE FIGURE UNDER ABSTRACTION



Figure. 22 *Untitled II*, 2012
(Oil on steel, 50 x 50 cm)

Sight finds itself barricaded in, it paints its distress. You come too late, after the party. The event of colours is over; the lights are going out over the great abandoned tables. You drag yourself across the floor-tiles, counting their doleful symmetries. You pick up what has fallen from the banquet of the flesh. You remember that a beggar can be the messenger of the gods.¹

Struggling with issues of scale in relation to the physical production of gesture I began to look harder at the figure in portrait as compositional structure. In particular I looked at the portrait as expressive generality rather than as illustrative specificity — as a universal condition rather than depiction or description. In this respect *Untitled II* (Figure. 22) presents a more formally developed figure — there is a sense of silhouetted volume and mass in the three-quarter profile — but the form is one that still refuses to allow features to settle into cohesion, instead maintaining the figure as interior matter, held between states, as the subjective consequence of erasure, of the failed attempt. Such is the severity of this reduction that the residue of form left behind is no longer portrait, but instead merely *head*. This generic term is better suited to the summation of the figure rather than the description of physiological particulars for posterity. *Untitled II* preserves *nothing* for posterity; the future is rewarded not with the nostalgia of memory derived from the transparency of legible imagery but instead with opacity that returns the viewer to the original unstable experience. Posterity is gifted the immediate — the future is gifted the present.

The term *head* suggests the figure as a contingent experience detached from or ambivalent to original source material. As *head Untitled II* is mere type, the non-descript form that nevertheless depicts — that describes limit of self and expression. In this sense *Untitled II* functions as a kind of *tronie*. This generic Dutch term (meaning face) is largely associated with a mode of seventeenth century figurative painting, and in particular the self-portraiture of Rembrandt Van Rijn. Generally bust length, single figures or heads, such tronie paintings were less to do with portraiture in terms of religious tropes, status and identity and instead more to do with the portrayal of extreme emotional states. Removed from specific narrative or allegorical context, tronies employed the figure in isolation — in the abstract. Consequently these figurative blanks served the painter as means of expanding their (representational) expressive vocabulary. In this sense the tronie serves as mode of study. The tronie privileges the subject of painting.

The same might also be said of Francis Bacon's tronies — the *Head* series. Like much of the painter's output their *factness* comes from provisionality, both in terms of image and procedure. Nothing is resolved in Bacon's *Head* paintings; they remain in a contingent state — like Rembrandt's tronie self-portraits they remain studies of or for. Like Bacon's portraits, the head paintings 'are the interrogation on the *limits* of the self'.² They ask the question, 'Up to what degree of distortion does an individual still remain himself...? Where lies the border beyond which a self ceases to be a self?'³ In Bacon's tronies, like *Head II*, painterly action corrupts, corrodes and reduces the figure to this limit. It is a threshold of absolute indeterminacy determined by Bacon's understanding of Rembrandt's painting. He comments

If you think of the great Rembrandt self-portrait in Aix-en-Provence, for instance, and you analyze it, you will see that there are hardly any sockets to the eyes, that it is almost completely anti-illustrational. I think that the mystery of fact is conveyed by an image being made out of non-rational marks. And you can't will this non-rationality of a mark. That is the reason that accident always has to enter into the activity, because the moment you know what to do, you're making just another form of illustration. But what can happen sometimes, as it happened in this Rembrandt self-portrait, is that there is a coagulation of non-representational marks which have led to making up this very great image. Well, of course, only part of this is accidental. Behind all that is Rembrandt's sensibility, which was able to hold onto one irrational mark rather than onto another. And abstract expressionism has all been done in Rembrandt's marks.⁴

Like *Head II*, *Untitled II* functions as a figurative blank whose erasive gestural language elicits a subjective response. Such an approach seeks to reduce the figure to a generalized but, nevertheless, more direct *figural* presence. Where the figurative resides within illustration, the *figural* is to be found in the opacity of isolation.

The distinction between these territories is one highlighted by Gilles Deleuze in his dissection of Bacon's painting. As Deleuze would have it, the figurative amounts to not only the interrelation between the *figure* and 'an object that it

is supposed to illustrate', but also, 'the relationship of an image to other images in a composite whole which assigns a specific object to each of them'.⁵ From within such relationships narrative inevitably seeps and with it illustration. However, as Deleuze writes 'Painting has neither a model to represent nor a story to narrate'.⁶ Through techniques of 'isolation', 'extraction', if not abjection, whereby the figure is deprived of the possibility of these relationships through, for example, the ambivalence of darkness, the figure is reduced to a 'what takes place' — to a simple matter of 'fact', or the fact of matter — the material insistence of gesture.⁷ Extracting the figural from the figure exposes a latent sense of the spiritual, a sense of the sacred exposed in the abjection of the figure — the figural reveals the ghost of the holy.

Deleuze comments that 'Thus isolated, the Figure becomes an Image, an Icon'.⁸ For Deleuze Image, derived from the Figure abstracted, ceases to be merely a framing device for sign and symbol — it ceases to be something that the viewer looks into; rather it becomes an experiential vehicle. Image ceases to correlate to imagery, to illustration; rather it invokes a sense of the *imaginary* — the un-heard phrase, the form of the unknowable.

This is a telling recalibration of terms. *Image*, divested of illustrative function, assumes the spirit of revelation associated with or derived from the contemplation of an *Icon*. Long since emptied of conventional religious iconography, the *Icon* nevertheless retains transcendent potential — the *Icon* maintains an insistence on 'communion' between the interested parties, between work, figure, spectator and materials. While no longer holy, such a communion remains resolutely spiritual. The figural thus becomes a kind of votive offering that initiates, or provides the *Image* for self-revelation, for a corporeal encounter with limit. The figure in isolation — in abstraction — becomes icon for *lack*, for the absence of clearly prescribed iconography, for the emptiness left in the wake of the emancipation of the image from religion, for the impossibility of expression in the darkness of that void.

Deleuze's notion of the 'figural' has a certain proximity to Bataille's conception of the formless. Both terms stand as operative agents of abstraction, in opposition to 'intelligible relations' and the literature/narrative they insist upon. Like formlessness the figural functions through and in abjection — it turns on privation, on silence, on the isolation of the figure. Both terms seek to de-classify, to bring things down in the world. Where formless seeks to liberate the word from meaning, the figural seeks to 'break with representation, to disrupt narration, to escape illustration, to liberate the Figure: to stick to the fact', or as Bataille might have it, stick to the *task* — the affective or experiential function of the figure in painting.⁹

Standing before Bacon's painting *Head II* the material conditions of the painting qualifies this notion of the figure rendered *figurally*. Presented in isolation the figure itself becomes an abstraction. Isolation in Bacon's *Head* series is taken to the extreme limit, reducing the figure to the contingency of a head barely discernible from the 'thicknesses and densities' that surround it.¹⁰ Without contextual scaffold on which to hang the butchered remains of the figure in *Head II* representational content is stripped out of the portrait, leaving the material experience of a kind of indistinct nothingness that returns us to Sartre's downward facing mode of being. Place in *Head II* cannot be determined pictorially, it cannot be entirely processed in compositional terms, rather place comes from the immediacy of the space of painting, from the material directness that emanates from painterly gesture. Place is found in the collaboration between the work and the spectator. There is a certain in-your-faceness to *Head II*, inasmuch as pictorial depth is undone by an unresolved figure/ground relationship that in the end offers a disorientating flatness, despite the texture and turmoil of the material surface. Both elements conspire in a single plane and, as such, are 'grasped in close view, a tactile or "haptic" view'.¹¹

The haptic view blinds the eye. The subjective 'I', the self, is instated in its place. The haptic view corrodes *looking*, substituting optical function with a kind of second sight, which 'discovers in itself a specific function of touch that is uniquely its own'.¹² Deleuze remarks that 'One might say that painters paint

with their eyes, but only insofar as they touch with their eyes'.¹³ Applying Lyotard's perspective, *Head II* is seen and not looked at — *Head II* is felt. He writes,

The painting is not something to be read, as contemporary semiologists would have it. Rather, as Klee put it, it has to be grazed, it makes visible, giving itself up to the eye like the exemplary thing that it is, like naturing nature (to borrow Klee's words again), since it makes visible seeing itself.¹⁴

Like touch the haptic view is direct, it is received by the eye as a conduit for immediacy upon the nervous system. Its visual language articulates Carl Einstein's notion of 'unmediated experience' of the 'immediate human being'.¹⁵ The materiality of the haptic view amounts to sensorial 'fact' and, as such, equates to knowledge — knowledge cut free from objectivity, from 'its culturally determined bondage to meaning'.¹⁶ In de-limiting the eye and with it the tyranny of cognition, the haptic view initiates an affective discourse independent of that of translation and interpretation, in opposition to the 'house of language'.¹⁷

Loss of Other Modalities of Sensation XIV (Figure. 23) is a finger painting. As such it marks a significant development in the studio research towards the haptic view, towards the confusion of eye and hand. Deleuze comments that this state of sensorial bewilderment comes about at the point where neither hand nor eye can exert their dominance, where neither is 'subordinated' — at the point at which *sight discovers in itself a specific function of touch*. Such a state, Deleuze argues, results from the unity of *catastrophe* and the *diagram*. Both terms might justifiably be substituted with that of gesture. Deleuze associates these terms with processes of corruption evident within Bacon's painting, with the painterly means by which the figurative is reduced or distilled to the figural. Triggered by the diagram, the movement between these states is downward — from the visual (predetermined optical space) to the visceral, from the cerebral to the sensational. Deleuze writes, 'A Sahara, a rhinoceros skin: such is the suddenly outstretched diagram. It is as if, in the midst of the figurative and probabilistic givens, a *catastrophe* overcame the



Figure. 23 *Loss of Other Modalities of Sensation XIV — part suite*, 2012
(Oil on stainless steel, 20 x 25 cm)

canvas'.¹⁸ The scrubbed out line, the smeared over form, the wiped out mass, the thrown paint — this 'operative set of traits' remove painting from a predetermined 'optical organization'. Beyond this threshold we discover the haptic view, where 'one can no longer see anything, as if in a catastrophe, a chaos'.¹⁹ This state of chaos, where opticality is blinded and the nervous system takes over, nevertheless exposes the potential for order, for visual 'rhythm as matter and material'.²⁰ Such blindness is brought about by the action of painting; by the (violent) gesture of the hand liberated from the brush as arbiter of the nostalgia of forms and 'guided by other forces', or forces of the *other*.²¹

My own painting process established conditions for such catastrophe, for gesture that opens the form. While brush, rag and palette knife continued to contribute to this process, the production of the work is here predominantly generated through marks made with hands directly on the painted surface. To be more specific the broad gestural syntax that accounts for the head — for the raked-over remains of a figure in isolation — is largely the result of painting in latex surgical gloves. Under latex, oil paint moves in a completely different way than it does under brush, rag or palette knife. Latex has unpredictable *bite*. Especially so in respect to painting on metal. With little or no friction, as fingers move across the painted support, the marks made run on like quicksilver before the latex catches, a shift in pressure or a crease in the rubber halting the mark and tearing paint abruptly off the surface. In *Loss of Other Modalities of Sensation XIV* the heel of the latex covered hand is the incident from which emerges the sensorial image, it is the incident that has 'introduced or distributed formless forces throughout the painting, which have a necessary relation with the deformed parts, or which are made use of as, precisely, "places"'.²² This disruptive gesture or *diagram* scrambles visual data, leaving behind corrupted code that intermittently reveals glimpses of resemblances. In *Loss of Other Modalities of Sensation XIV* soft smear is replaced by the violence of a tear. This tear offers a more expansive compositional structure, a richer diagram you might say — one that can be worked into, allowing this material language to be produced on a larger scale.

PAINTING PAINTING:
TOWARDS THE UNSYMBOLIZED IMAGINARY



Figure. 24 *Untitled III*, 2013
(Oil on stainless steel, 30 x 40 cm)

The unconscious is very kind to alert the conscious by means of signs. In the least bit of daydreaming, the other vision begins to paint. Untranslatable, the dream throws into the soul a suspicion as to its health. It is not in possession of itself, a ghost is haunting it. It learns in this way that the other, the clandestine passenger whose language and manners it does not know, knows how to say and show what it can't [...] Thus, the thought of painting: its always absent presence haunts the life of the worthy gaze, and it wakes up only if the gaze dozes off. It worries the whole of the visible by making it suffer the intrusion of unknown visual idioms. One paints in order to honour the fleeting angel.²³

In pursuing *figural* painting my aim was to explore the threshold between autonomous mark and load-bearing gesture — between producing *effect*, chasing chance and accident, and painting *affect*. Simply put, the work needed to bring the smear closer to the figure as an open form, closer to representation. Not in the sense of illustration, but rather representation in terms of painting as *presentation*. In this sense the work needed to extrapolate the single gesture into a richer, deeper vocabulary using an appropriate contextual scaffold.

This I found in the painting of painting. Where initially archival photography had offered some sort of oblique visual or pictorial foundation to early paintings like *Paradigm* and *Study II*, as gesture in relation to the abstraction of the figure assumed greater prominence research moved towards painting as source material. By drawing on the history of the medium, and in particular Rembrandt's self portraits, the intention was to situate subject matter, the matter of subjectivity, more clearly within the business of painting itself. In this respect the material encounter functions like a Mobius band, whereby start and finish mark the same point — the experience of gesture returning the spectator to the matter of painting and vice versa. Subsequently gestural language, the vocabulary of mark making, is positioned within a discourse of practice. Image, as such, is stripped of the obligation to illustrate and narrate through a plastic language of disruption and abjection that invokes the imaginary. The unconscious is brought into proximity through the provisionality of gesture, through the contingency of the 'tear, integral to language, where the work of expression occurs. Such violence belongs to the depth of language'.²⁴

The use of paintings as direct source material has its own particular heritage and reflects an approach to picture making far more complex than mere citation or homage. As Willem de Kooning comments

If I am influenced by another painter from another time, that's like the smile of the Cheshire Cat in Alice, the smile left over when the cat is gone. In other

words I could be influenced by Rubens, but I would certainly not paint like Rubens.²⁵

This is research embodied in the physical action of painting. The relationship between source and work reflects an open-ended process of learning and passing on — a kind of processing of knowledge through materiality, through visual experience — a physical working through which equates to thinking in paint. Richard Kendall describes Leon Kossoff's frequent direct use of Nicolas Poussin's paintings, among others, as a mean of penetrating a little into their identity and finding structures of his own to account for their success. For Kendall this type of symbiotic relationship between a work and its direct antecedents attests to the creative co-existence of the studio and the museum.²⁶ The resulting work is a distinct act of creation, self-sufficient and autonomous; uniquely the product neither of Poussin or Kossoff, but rather, of a kind of retrospective conversation between the two. The language that sustains this dialogue is not mimetic or interpretive, it has little to do with the stagnation of simulation, rather it is a language of process, corporeal and determinedly unresolved. The *study* is destined to remain necessarily incomplete — the known is cast adrift on the formlessness of the unknown.

Francis Bacon's preoccupation with paintings from the canon of art history is well charted. His work reveals periodic obsessions with the painting of numerous artists including Velasquez, Rembrandt, Ingres, Van Gogh and Picasso. By drawing on old master works Bacon was able to extricate himself from the burden of image — in using reproductions of paintings the 'problem's already been solved', he says. However, he goes on to point out that 'The problem that you're setting up, of course, is another problem'.²⁷ This *problem*, that of 'making appearance out of something which is not illustration', is a 'particular theory' which haunts Bacon's use of, for example, Velasquez's portrait of *Pope Innocent X*, 1650 — a painting he would return to over again, not, he claimed, for the latent religiosity of the painting, but for a sense of the spiritual derived from a confrontation with the human form beyond the confines of the figurative — from painting as a *process of devotion* to that which Bacon described as 'impossible to achieve'.²⁸ Such devotion, such

blind faith in the possibility of painting as a distinct, sensational language, such *study* — a term that persists in the titles of Bacon's paintings — maintains the material discourse of the medium.

In these paintings study, as such, is bound to Bacon's strategies of disruption and distortion. His devotion to the painting of Velasquez manifests a kind of Bataillean form of study where defilement, desecration and iconoclasm are the prevailing tactics. As we have seen, the first of his studies after Velasquez's *Pope Innocent X* (1650) also ends the Head series of 1948/49. In *Head VI, 1949* (Figure. 25) the process of study, the thinking in paint, is brutally exposed. The compositional structure appears uncertain, with the papal figure coalescing, within the diagrammatic box-like re-framing device that would become a familiar component of Bacon's pictorial manner, from raw abbreviation that leaves a bust length portrait little more than an apparition emanating from violently sketched in darkness. This darkness striates the head of the figure and the suggestion of the throne behind. It is an image that appears as though a relic of work destroyed — the leftover carrion of a portrait that has been scraped and scrubbed back to the raw tooth of the unprimed canvas. For Bacon *study* is a process of translation, and as such it is the movement between the *high* and *low*, between the coherence of image and the other of irrational form. In this downward movement we once again determine the formless in action. Dawn Ades points to the proximity of Bacon to Bataille suggesting that in *Head VI* perhaps the

idea was to test one of the greatest portraits ever painted, of a man set highest above his fellow men (the archetypal father, verging on the divine) in the grip of a feeling so intense that the only expression of it brought him close to the beasts. It must be emphasized that it is not the intention here to suggest that Bacon was in any sense illustrating Bataille, but rather that their concerns, preoccupations and attitudes run parallel.²⁹

Image available at www.francis-bacon.com

Figure. 25 Francis Bacon, *Head VI*, 1949
(Oil on canvas, 20 x 30 cm)

While Ades locates these shared preoccupations in Bacon's imagery, in his fascination with the mouth and the animal, it is also possible to locate them within Bacon's materiality, within the way he physically applies the paint — in the slashing verticality of black that obliterates much of the face in *Head VI*.

Bacon himself was evidently conflicted by the paintings he produced that cited old master works, commenting that he regretted in particular the studies he produced on Velasquez's *Pope Innocent X*, 'because I think that this thing was an absolute thing that was done and nothing more can be done about it'.³⁰ Elsewhere, however, he commented that drawing on masterworks 'breed other images for me. And of course one's always hoping to renew them'.³¹ Once again language allows for confusion — there is slippage in terms, the 'absolute thing' giving rise to contradiction. As Carl Einstein points out in *Documents* 'the absolute is precisely that supreme truth which remains indemonstrable [...] it is identical with the void and with that which has no object'.³² There is no workable corollary between thingness and the absolute, which by its nature exceeds the known and the recognizable. Rather, Bacon's turn of phrase suggests he viewed the Velasquez painting as a closed, perfect form — *nothing more can be done about it*, he says. The absolute has little to do with such perfection of form and composition. 'Object-related vision', writes Carl Einstein, 'in which the object overwhelms pictorial form, is passive'.³³ The absolute is anything but passive.

Bacon's material language, the language of catastrophe, the syntax of smudge, smear and eviscerating brush mark cleaves open closed, idealized form and reduces the Velasquez painting to an abject state — a contingent state that renews the possibility of the absolute in the gestural expression of limit and representation's impossibility. Bacon returns the Velasquez work to the abstract, to the idea of a painting. To study is to look at, to scrutinize — to see. However, for Bacon, study, in pursuit of what Einstein termed 'pure visual

function', relies upon a certain groping material intuition that reduces composition to sensation — to 'a perfectly concrete individual experience'.³⁴

Such *concrete individual experience* offers a perspective on Bacon's comment that he's always hoping to 'renew' the master works upon which he draws. By painting from painting we can speculate that Bacon sought to re-instate the self in works over run by the symbolic and buried under the weight of historical and cultural narrative, and in so doing return them to the realm of the unrepresentable via the material language of abstraction. In this sense Bacon's vivisectioning brush opens up the closed and the familiar, putting such painting out of reach and invoking the unknown. As discussed, Mark Godfrey has marked the renewed currency of the unknown within contemporary painterly practice. He writes

Such invocations of unknowability could be caricatured as so many New Age bromides, but we would be wrong to characterize them in this way. For a start, the unknowable has a new premium in a culture that prides itself on being able to know everything via instant access (constitutional or not) to massive troves of information.³⁵

This currency, employed with a greater or lesser degree of sincerity, orientates, within certain contemporary practices, towards the painting of painting and the language of gesture. Godfrey's survey is focused on abstract painters. It is worth noting that the figure remains absent from his discussion of painting that has established 'resistant positions between authenticity and appropriation'.³⁶

Philip Gurrey, however, is a contemporary painter who has channeled concerns with the language of gesture in relation to the unknown through the figure in portrait. Like Bacon, Gurrey is interested in painting painting — in the subject of the impossibility of viable expressive means. He approaches the canon of masterworks as vehicle for material improvisations that take form beyond the threshold of legibility to what Samuel Beckett describes as 'Total object, complete with missing parts'.³⁷



Figure. 26 Phillip Gurrey, *Margaretha de Geer*, 2007, (Oil on board, 55 x 50 cm)

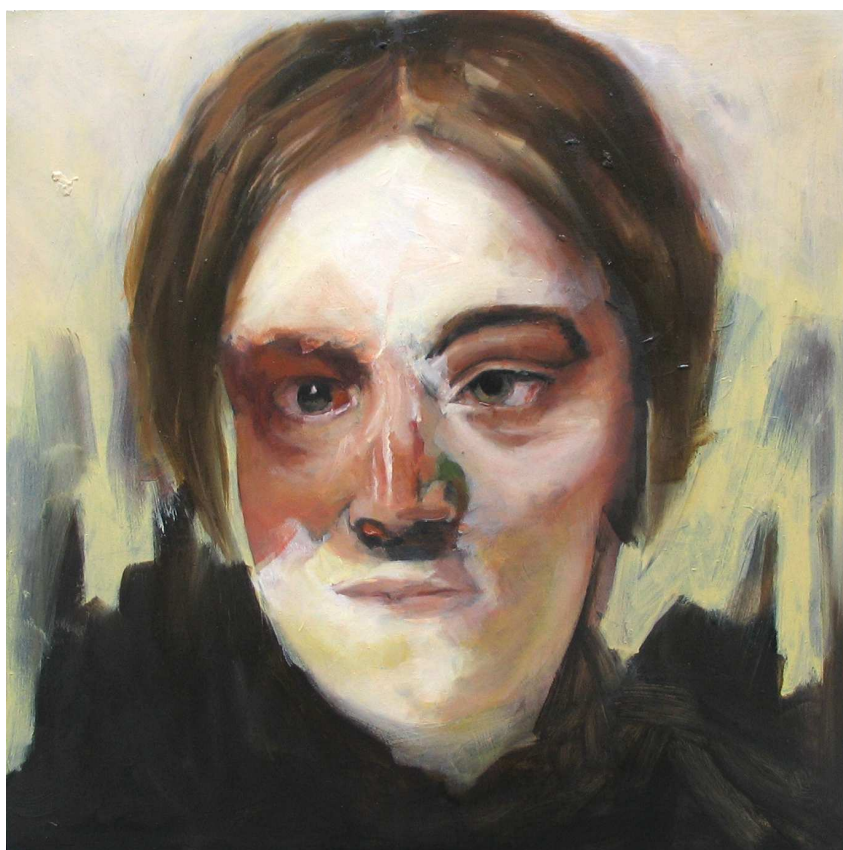


Figure. 27 *Girl*, 2007, (Oil on board, 31 x 31 cm) courtesy of the artist

In early works like *Margaretha de Geer*, 2007 (Figure. 26) and *Girl*, 2007 (Figure. 27) Gurrey cites the techniques and visual tropes of seventeenth century northern European painting — a period which in Gurrey's view witnessed a secularization of painting. He comments

I investigated Van Dyck, Rembrandt and Rubens, by taking parts of society portraits and re-working them into a more contemporary image. I was commenting on how we live now and the birth of modern culture. 17th-century Holland saw the rise of money, and the death of royalty and the church. To use images from that time was important.³⁸

Like Bacon, Gurrey turns to the painting 'establishment' — to the overwhelming canon, over burdened with literature, consumed by historical narrative — to subvert the written word and cleave open iconography and cliché through a sense of materiality that returns painting to the *Now*. As with Bacon's Velasquez paintings, masterworks provide Gurrey with the scaffold for study, for material research — for thinking in paint. Known images and academic techniques are deployed as departure points for what Gurrey describes as 'investigation in paint'.³⁹ Like Bacon, Gurrey approaches the figure as a vehicle for abstraction. Both artists are interested in the body under forces of abjection.

Where Bacon cites images from radiography and dentistry, Gurrey's early painting draws upon the war photography of Percy Hennell documenting trauma surgery. As Gurrey's work has developed, so the materiality of visual language has risen to the surface. Where in early works like *Eye*, 2007 (Figure. 28) Gurrey investigates the figure as indeterminate proposition through representational images of the abstraction of surgical scarring, in later works like *After Goya*, 2010 (Figure. 29) he does so through downward facing painterly gesture — through the figure instead scarred by the material process of painting. It is the palette knife that surgically incises alizarin crimson across the portrait, it is the dripping turpentine and the dragged rag that anesthetizes the known and instates the unrepresentable. In this sense, the figural supersedes the figurative — material immediacy supersedes narrative.



Figure. 28 *Eye*, 2007, (oil on board, 31 x 31 cm)



Figure. 29 *After Goya*, 2010, (oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm)

Courtesy of the artist

Territories disintegrate. The sacred is made profane as seventeenth century techniques of glazing and grisaille are corrupted by the impasto vocabulary of the abstract expressionist, by the mid-twentieth century drip, drag, slash and smear. Gurrey's points of departure become harder to determine, collapsing into the event horizon of painting's concrete presence, its brutal fact-ness. 'For me', comments Gurrey, 'a lot of the meaning of the work is intrinsic to the paint, it's not a reference to something'.⁴⁰ As such Gurrey's *After Goya* studies mark a development in his work from painting *paintings* — image and motif, to painting *painting* — process and presence. In these works references are buried under a language of visceral gesture that articulates the *formless figure*.

It is this particular sense of *study* that shaped a series of my own paintings based on the self-portraits of Rembrandt. Formally speaking the prevailing use of strong chiaroscuro in seventeenth century painting and in particular Rembrandt's self-portraits facilitates the development of a *figural* approach to the figure. There is a singular quality to Rembrandt's self-portraits. An enveloping darkness absorbs and consumes form, while at the same time alluding to it. In this sense the figure is itself the catastrophe, the gesture that splits the whole, the apparition of limit that defiles the infinite. Rembrandt presents the figure isolated within the dimmest of light against indeterminate space, against a painted blankness that refuses geographical or architectural grounding. Such Beckett-like blankness ensures the void is thus an ever-present threat. As Joanne Shaw remarks Rembrandt's use of chiaroscuro subsequently served to inform Beckett's conception of a darkness both psychological and theatrical, both sacred and profane, or rather profanely sacred. She points out that Beckett transcribed R. H Wilenski's *An Introduction to Dutch Art*, which included texts on Rembrandt's use of darkness, light and the abject state found in the 'dim void' between.⁴¹ Shaw notes that Beckett evidently copied passages that describe Rembrandt's painted non-space as 'limitless recession and 'eternal mystery' and his portraits as 'records of emotive fragments in relation to boundless and mysterious space and time'. As Shaw comments

If we look at his portraits or self-portraits with light directed onto the faces (and sometimes the hands), and the rest of their bodies only faintly seen in the darkness, we observe a particular emotion that is introspective and yet reminiscent of something other than the merely self-conscious.⁴²

The *human fragments* of Rembrandt's painting, Shaw argues, enabled Beckett to develop a theater of interiority — a theater of inner experience.

This notion of the fragmentation of the human, of the figure corroded, is central to my material study of Rembrandt's portrait painting. In *Untitled III*, 2012 (Figure. 24 - p. 159) the formal precept of the oscillation between light and dark, between figure and ground affords a kind of essential compositional stability, while seventeenth century dress, the 'architecture' of breastplates, armor, studded collars and ruffs gives structure that frames the suggestion of human form, and facilitates the exploration of the boundary between abstraction and representation, between chaos and order. Such compositional elements serve to anchor a visual language that fractures and fragments the figure. The tension between light and dark is activated by gesture that refuses to allow either state to settle. *Limitless recession* vibrates against the *fore*, the ground against the figure, releasing a kind of 'visual noise'. In this static charge of indeterminacy Shaw locates 'Beckettian infinity' and in it something of the sublime. It is a sublime experienced abjectly — in the gloaming — in the 'hiatus between the light of life and the ceaseless blackness of the self's death'.⁴³

The painterly process of *Untitled III* equates to what Shaw describes as a worsening of sight, which nevertheless prompts *seeing*. The erasive smear that drags the facial features in *Untitled III* into indeterminacy results in 'a negative seeing in an negative light — a reverse-direction creation which does not result in annihilation but, at the boundaries of possibility, a refusal to disappear'. This 'failure of ceasing to be', writes Shaw, 'is shown to have its own sublimity'.⁴⁴



Figure. 30 *Untitled IV, V*, 2013, (Oil on stainless steel, 20 x 20 cm)



The Rembrandt studies are determined by the decisions that arise in the process of the making; they allow mark and gesture to lead the way. In *Untitled IV, V* 2013 (Figure. 30) for example, compositional tension comes not from content, from image but from how paint is physically put down, or more accurately how paint is removed. There is no intermediary state between the original point of departure and the work. There are no preparatory stages in the process that prescribe how much of the source material will endure. The *study* is in the painting of the work. It is the push and pull of material translation that accounts for the progression of image, or the image of painterly progression. Paintings within this series were necessarily completed in one or two sessions at most. As the black ground begins to dry, its physical properties degrade from a conductive state of wetness to a more resistant, tar-like condition as medium and paint cloy on the stainless steel surface.

As this body of painting progressed I began to work in series (Figure. 32). By repeatedly subjecting the same image to these corrosive gestural techniques the emphasis shifts from image to mark and process. Returning time and again to one image insists on a visual experience dictated not by pictorial content, but by plastic language and the sense of impossibility that it inevitably expresses. Presented in series, painting remains an unresolved, unlimited, open-ended set of variations that become a kind of contradictory proposition of negation in painting encountered as an accumulated experience. This idea was further informed by a research trip to view Francisco Goya's cycle of *Black Painting's* at the Prado Museum in Madrid in the summer of 2011. Neither commissioned nor sold, between 1819 and 1823, Goya painted this collection of fourteen idiosyncratic works directly onto the walls of the Quinto Del Sardo (The House of the Deaf Man).

While there is perhaps much that could be made from the content of these works in relation to painting, darkness and the gothic sublime, from the point of view of my studio research the value of these paintings came from the experience of them not as disparate images to be analytically unpicked for meaning, reference and narrative, but instead from their presence or their



Figure. 31 *Loss of Other Modalities of Sensation XV – part suite*, 2011
(Oil on stainless steel 3 x 20 x 30 cm)

present-ness as an encounter with painting as cohesive body, with painting as something close to environment. While presented in the ultimately artificial context of the Prado, nevertheless, this cycle of oblique paintings, which stray from representation and illustration into near total material abstraction, exert considerable force as a whole. Surrounded by painting that lingers on the threshold of legibility, that exhibits opaqueness both materially and conceptually, the viewer is cut adrift from past and future tense and left only with dizzying immediacy. Standing alone, at first opening in front of Goya's Black Paintings the viewer is conceivably confronted by the same sublime *Now* experienced in front of, say, the fourteen paintings that make up Barnett Newman's *Stations of the Cross*, exhibited at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 1966 — or later the same year, in front of Ad Reinhardt's cycle of *Black Paintings* exhibited at the Jewish Museum, New York in 1966. In relation to the *Station* paintings Newman comments

Why fourteen? Why not one painting? The Passion is not a protest but a declaration. I had to explore its emotional complexity. That is, each painting is total and complete by itself, yet only the fourteen together make clear the wholeness of the single event.⁴⁵

The Stations of the Cross cycle is a not an evocation of religious spirituality, of Christian dogma, rather the sum of the parts, the single event that destabilizes the self, is a 'statement' of the spirit of painting. Each station Newman remarks, is 'an expression of how I worked. I was a pilgrim as I painted'.⁴⁶

Newman's cycle of paintings dedicated to the cry of *Lema* are a response to what the painter described as the 'plastic challenge' of the 'question that has no answer'.⁴⁷ In 2010 Philip Gurrey undertook the same impossible challenge, also producing a cycle of paintings for the Stations of the Cross. Unlike Newman's works, however, Gurrey's were commissioned by the church — namely St. Andrews, London, where they were exhibited alongside conventional Christian iconography. In this respect the specificity of context heightens the tension between spirituality and the spirit of paint.



Figure. 32 Philip Gurrey, *VII Jesus falls for a second time*, 2010
(Oil on board 31 x 30 cm)



Fig. 33 Philip Gurrey, *XII Jesus dies upon the cross*, 2010
(Oil on board, 31 x 30 cm) courtesy of the artist

Uniformly modest in scale (fifteen paintings, all 31 x 30 cm, oil on board), Gurrey's *Stations* cycle shifts from legible figuration, in works like *VII Jesus Falls For a Second Time* (Figure. 32), to figural abstraction, in works like *XII Jesus Dies Upon the Cross* (Figure. 33), where the cry of Lema is reduced to a subtractive material gesture — to the articulate silence of dripping turpentine and wiped off paint. The figure, once the barometer against which the sublime could be measured, is reduced to the abject stain — to the blood on Bacon's pavement.

As the installation view (Figure. 34) of the St. Andrews exhibition illustrates, Gurrey's *Station Cycle* marks the distinction between a pre and postmodern conception of the sacred. In Gurrey's painting we see the decomposition and decay of traditional iconography long associated with experiences of the sublime, leaving behind instead a painted surface that testifies to nothing more than the *passion* of painting and the inevitability of failure found therein. As Bataille remarks

Christianity has made the sacred *substantial*, but the nature of the sacred, in which today we recognize the burning existence of religion, is perhaps the most ungraspable thing that has been produced between men; the sacred is only a privileged moment of communal unity, a moment of the convulsive communication of what is ordinarily stifled.⁴⁸

Gurrey's surface attests to just such *convulsive communication*. While narrative haunts the work, persisting in the titling, it is to the impossibility of adequate language that Gurrey's paintings orientate, to the presence of painting in the absence of God. The *privileged moment of communal unity*, here located between work and spectator, is paradoxically an isolating experience of *self*.

Gurrey ends his cycle with *XV The Ressurrection* (Figure. 35), a work that sees the white monochrome rise from the dead. However, Gurrey's monochrome is not the clean white witness as modernism marched towards



Fig. 34 Philip, *Stations of the Cross*, Installation View, 2010
St. Andrew's Church, London



Figure. 35 XV *The Resurrection*, 2010 (Oil on board, 31 x 30 cm)

Courtesy of the artist

minimalism, it is not the white of Robert Rauschenberg or Malevich, rather Gurrey's is the off-white of the scraped back surface, it is the dirty white left behind by the process of erasure or the decay-yellow white of the Turin Shroud, stained with the traces of the figure. The iconographic language of religious narrative as been entirely consumed within the figural gesture, within a kind a negation that, in the end, reinstates possibility in the snow-blindness brought about in sullied white — a negation that resurrects the 'blank canvas' and with it obligation.

As with Newman, the painterly language of Gurrey's *Stations of the Cross* is expressive of the limit of expression. Beneath the material gesture we find nothing more than the desire to reveal the unknown — nothing more than a Bataillean sense of torment. Gurrey's process relies upon the imp of the perverse. In a work like *Jesus Falls For A Second Time* the disruptive gestural impulse, the arbitrary, *catastrophic* mark destabilizes representational technique. Gurrey likens this intuitive, improvisational process to that of jazz, commenting that 'Abstract painters like John Hoyland work in this manner. Always working in response to the previous mark they have just made. It's almost like a call and response'.⁴⁹ For Gurrey, as for Newman, the *Stations of the Cross* works are a material language for experience once located within religion.

Though Newman stated that the conception of the *Stations* cycle coalesced from nowhere other than the doing of the work, in a sense, he too is painting from painting. The *image* of the Passion is a given — its iconography seared onto the retina of western visual culture. As such Newman was free to articulate the 'plastic challenge' of a material language for the inexpressible. In the same way, returning time and again to Rembrandt's self-portraits, in a painting like *Juju*, 2013 (Figure. 36) for example, liberates gesture from illustration allowing it to move towards painting as a statement of obligation and failure. The unfinished or barely started quality of the work bears fragile testament to the impossibility of presentation/representation, to the implausibility of adequate means. The subtractive mark, the tear in the surface is a kind of hole within the whole, a void within unity (Figure. 37).



Figure. 36 *Juju*, 2013,
(Oil on stainless steel, 50 x 50 cm)



Figure. 37 *Juju*—detail

Invariably structure in the work is born of the frustration of articulation, of my limits as a painter. It proceeds from backward steps in the painting, from fingers scribbling through coherent form, from the erasing scythe of the palette knife — from the cancelling out. The violent tracings of dragged paint form phrases of a cursive script of sorts that testifies to process — to a kind of post-war confrontation between the artist, his tools and his medium. Passages of smeared paint appear stable and affirmative before they melt away into negative space — into ‘limitless recession’ we might say. Though a work like *Ju-Ju* perhaps overstates its case, being too deliberate, too realized, too legible — closer to the scream than silence, too much like painting as opposed to non-painting — it nevertheless served to expand a negative vocabulary in my painting. Such visual language equates to a form of sublimation of the unconscious taboo of the figure in postmodern painting. Via negative gesture, via de-formation it is re-appropriated as a culturally acceptable form — as a kind of abjection of the figure, as its formlessness, whose un-verifiability insists that the viewer ‘does not leave the reality of the painting and that the artist’s vision is not interrupted by comparative observation. The viewer isolates himself and forgets’.⁵⁰ This isolation, this *loss of self* amounts to something close to sublime experience.

Such visual language shifts painting towards what Carl Einstein termed ‘antipictorial experience’.⁵¹ Referencing Analytical Cubism he writes, ‘Instead of presenting the result of an observation, the painter presents the result of a visual process that is not interrupted by objects. He is not content with an abbreviated rendering that would eliminate the refracted parts’.⁵² The discourse shifts from sign, motif and cultural criteria — Einstein’s ‘immortized dead turkeys’ — towards painting as presence, an experience that is cued from the vague recollection of the figure, but is no longer dependent on it. It transcends knowledge and its motifs at the same time that it offers their apparition. ‘The condition of such simultaneity’, writes Einstein,

is a quickness immeasurable in time that resembles the rapid, synthetic force of dreams. Such quickness is possible only because one is not distracted by the motif, and because the objective tendency dwells at the periphery, yet

does remain present, for the pictorial forms are directed towards the subjugation of nature.⁵³

FIGURING ABSTRACTION:
THE SMEAR AS PORTRAIT OF THE SELF



Figure. 38 *Symptom IV*, 2013
(oil on stainless steel, 40 x 40 cm)

These paintings would need a text that would honour the shortfall of sentences. That would bring out the mutism of words. In which one would detect the death-rattle that language covers, as Quignard says. [...] Even a poem, even the most naked poem, would still be too prepared, would give much to be understood. It would make us believe in the shimmer of meaning. We'd need a prose that would, sounding hollow, be the equal of these chromatic vanities. White, Black, neutral groan here so low in the dazzling parade of pigments that the complaint of not being able to see is scarcely heard. We'd need a prose full of words in which one would discern one's disappointment at not being able to say anything, a little exaltation that closed lips let pass.⁵⁴

Juju (Figure. 36, 37) says too much, is too verbose. As a *visual poem* it is too prepared, too equipped. Its gestural language is too descriptive, offering optical specificity at the expense of haptic generality. In short there is too much to look at in the painting and not enough to see. The figure emerges not from the action of painting, from essential material expression, but from the painting of action, ie, the expectation of gestural effect. The resultant image appears somehow too close — the figure is presented in mannered proximity without the ‘distances of the Sahara’, as Bacon would put it.⁵⁵ There is disconnection between the visual whole and the language that undoes it; the ‘condition of simultaneity’ is subsequently blocked. ‘Quickness’, the immediacy of visual experience acting directly upon the nervous system is stalled as gesture overwhelms the figure. The threshold that brings representation and abstraction to tension gives out as smears, smudges and the erasive gouges of the palette knife consume composition. Commenting on Bacon’s navigation of this threshold Deleuze writes

The diagram must not eat away at the entire painting, it must remain operative and controlled. The violent methods must not be given free reign, and the necessary catastrophe must not submerge the whole. The diagram is a possibility of fact — it is not the fact itself. Not all the figurative givens have to disappear; and above all, a new figuration, that of the Figure, should emerge from the diagram and make the sensation clear and precise.⁵⁶

In the painting of *Juju* the phrases of material rhythm, the movement of the paint within the compositional whole achieved a certain autonomy that prompted the question, what if violent methods are given free reign? What if the diagram is permitted to eat away, to corrode the entire painting? Under such conditions can gesture itself assume the capacity of the figure; can its ambiguity bring about the necessary tension between the chaos of the unknown and the order of the familiar?

Deleuze insists that the diagram unchecked leaves painting in an ‘irremediably confused state’. Its efficacy requires ‘contour’ — a mechanism that confines or contains the gestural rupture to ‘certain moments of the act of

painting'.⁵⁷ The question of whether the figure is intrinsic to this procedure of confinement, whether it is essential to this mechanism of containment, shaped the development of studio research as the autonomy of gesture became more pronounced within the *Rembrandt* study series. Consequently, the project evolved towards a gestural language that presented the arbitrary, conditioned — not by the figure but by the 'localization', to use Deleuze's term, of the ground, by the vibration caused in the oscillation between limitless recession and immediate presence of mark. In this sense research shifted from abstracting the figure towards figuring the abstract.

Symptom IV (Figure. 38) is an early piece from this period of studio research. It is a work on a tentative scale, but as such returns the viewer to an intimate experience of surface and the material language therein. The physical process of working remains relatively unchanged. As previously, the prologue to the painting is the laying down of the dark ground over the steel plate. This mechanical, somewhat un-thinking procedure is a kind of material contemplation that sets specific psychological conditions for painting proper, when conscious thinking gives way to thinking in paint. The contemporary painter Jacqueline Humphries, in conversation with fellow artist Cecily Brown, likens this precursory phase to Olympic swimmers wetting-down before they swim. 'It's like they have to become one with the pool', she writes, 'I realized I have to be prepared to be dirty to be able to do anything worthwhile in the studio'.⁵⁸ These initial stages, defined by the smell of mediums and minerals, the viscosity of pigment, the feel of the steel support, invests the eventual action of painting with a sense of materiality that is innately or essentially (self) reflective. Humphries remarks, 'The very substance of paint is a sort of abstract, formless thing that's very *other*, but physical and biological too. It's very base'.⁵⁹ Paint, then, being both physical and biological, is of the body. In and of itself it is a matter of flesh — limber, slimy, secreted — 'an *informed* smearing of shit' is Cecily Brown's irreverent description of painting.⁶⁰ At the same time, paint alludes to the body beyond its base limit. It is at once corporeal and at the same time immaterial. Paint is a *sort of abstract* only in its relation to the body, to the figure. The relationship is symbiotic, if not

parasitic. 'The body is the Figure', Deleuze writes, 'not the structure.'⁶¹ This statement might also read, 'The paint is the Figure, not the structure'.

In this sense gesture might be seen as a kind of anatomy. The figure is flayed to the bare bones with the violence of mark and mistake.. The once disparate vocabularies of abstraction and representation begin to run together. Talking to Cecily Brown about her work Humphries comments that

Your paintings are truly figurative but approach concerns that are more the domain of abstraction: certain ways of using paint, making forms, the way the image disperses and re-congeals, the respiratory quality of your forms and how they seem to expand and contract, the way movement occurs.⁶²

Again we see paint itself become corporeal, it assumes bodily presence — its materiality invest forms with this *respiratory quality*. If not quite a 'living thing' as such, painting breathes, it lets go the *little exaltation that closed lips let pass*, the exaltation that articulates *one's disappointment at not being able to say anything*. Bringing abstract concerns to bear upon the figure amounts to a kind of sublimation. Gesture and mark serve as the means of repression. In Humphries' paintings there is a sense of the figure cancelled or redacted behind fiercely free expressive language. Such a vocabulary is constrained within ambivalent contours of taped off lines — lines that contain Humphries' expressive bodily expulsions. As Mark Godfrey comments 'the history of Western painting has centered on the representation of skin'. In the absence of its image it is the fleshiness of paint that acts as lure for the viewer.

In *Kat*, 2009 (Fig. 39) Humphries presents a monochrome whose aggressive gestural language is barely contained at all, but for the brief serrating zig-zag of taped edge that runs down the mid right hand side of the painting. A latent desire for the figure, perhaps intrinsic to all painting, is consumed by the catastrophe that here runs amok. The physical gestures of the painting seem like the remains of a figure scribbled out — the smears of rag and brush wipe through a mass of darkness that obliquely implies human form in portrait.

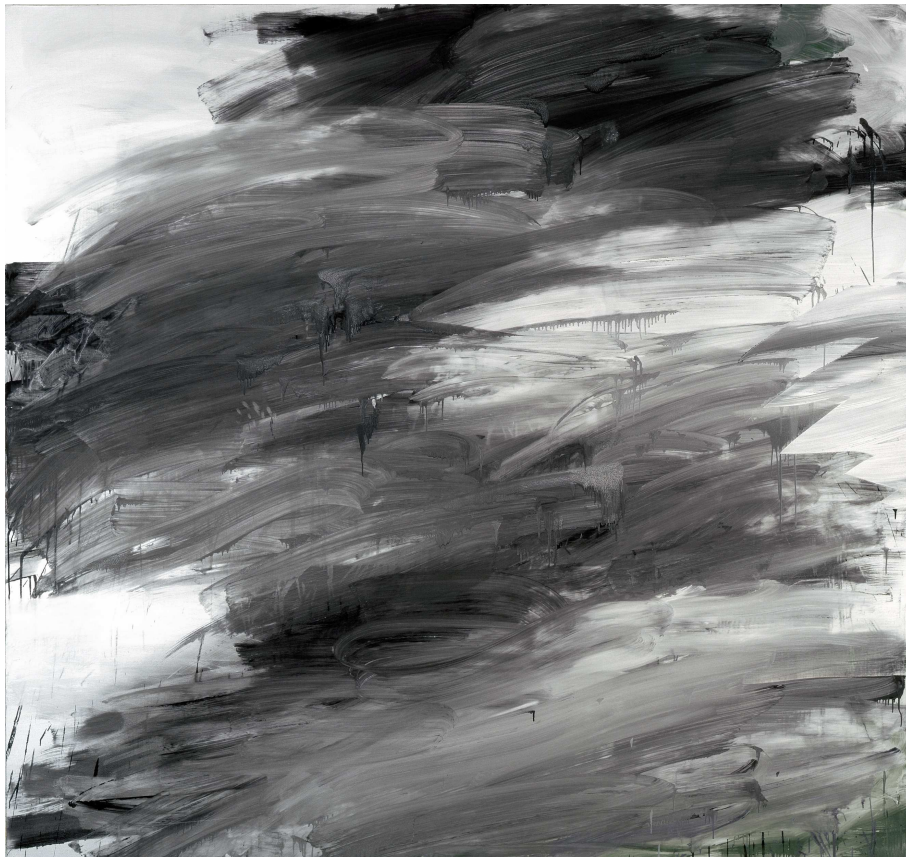


Figure. 39 Jacqueline Humphries, *Kat*, 2009, (Oil on linen, 228 x 24 cm)



Figure. 40 Jacqueline Humphries, *Untitled*, 2011 (Oil on linen, 228 x 243 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Green Naftali, New York

The smear sublimates it, leaving fore and ground to vibrate against each other. In this sense *Kat* is the privation of the figure. As such, however, it is a double negative. In its absence the figure is felt all the more keenly. The figural is propped up with the remains of the figure — the *human fragments* left behind in Rembrandt's shadows, shadows that Humphries disrupts in *Kat*.

It might be said that Humphries approaches abstraction with concerns more in the domain of figuration. She comments that 'I like to think you make a painting against the background of all other pictures, so the figures are there, offstage'.⁶³ Despite her best efforts, against such contingency the figure endures in the handmade mark, in the traces of physical expression and in the base-ness of paint as body. Humphries' paintings insist upon a physical experience that is disorientating and contradictory. They 'challenge us to look carefully and slowly' at an immediate experience.⁶⁴ The scale of her work is generally that of the body, of arms-reach dimensions. However, she refuses to allow the viewer to anchor themselves within this material field. Godfrey notes that Humphries' work ends 'in a place where the painting will not cohere and creates the experience of the unknown at every instance of looking at it'.⁶⁵

In more recent painting, like *Untitled*, 2011 (Figure. 40) Humphries begins with a painted frame — a finite contour against which to stage an infinite expansion of *malerisch* language. Invoking the spirit of Barnett Newman, Humphries comments that 'This frame is a way of saying, 'this, here, now''.⁶⁶ Rather than emptiness there is fullness, rather than silence there is visual language, there is the event of gesture. The frame mitigates the threat of the void of arbitrary abstraction. Humphries remarks, 'My goal is always to paint a picture, not just an abstraction'.⁶⁷ A certain proximity to Newman is further evinced in Humphries' painting. A work like *Untitled*, 2008 (Figure. 42) takes Newman's iconic zip and turns it up to eleven. Here Humphries' *now* is manifest in an impossibly complex visual matrix created from painting over, through and around masking tape zips to the point at which opticality fails and the haptic view takes over. In places the tape is left on the painted surface as testament to intuition, to the feeling orientated process that is painting.



Fig. 41 Jacqueline Humphries, *Untitled*, 2008,
(Oil on linen, 228 x 243 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Green Naftali, New York

The deployment of the zip is more than citation; it is more than a knowing postmodern nudge and wink in the direction of sensibilities past. Humphries evidently genuinely shares the concerns of Barnett Newman. She remarks

It's a notion I have about what abstraction can do, which I attempt to answer differently with each body of work; that maybe you can augment the "real" effect without the intermediary of represented "things". For example, there are ways of expressing fullness and emptiness other than with objects. And what really compels me is the very palpable risk of failure, as if edging up to an abyss.⁶⁸

On some level Newman and Humphries are painting the same thing. In her ambition to *augment the "real" effect* there are echoes of Newman's sense of struggle 'to bring out from the nonreal, from the chaos of ecstasy something that evokes a memory of the emotion of an experienced moment of total reality'.⁶⁹ Now is as now as it was then, when Newman painted *Onement I* in 1948.

In earlier stages of studio research the initial 'architecture' of the work was established through the image of a Rembrandt self-portrait, in *Symptom IV* (Figure. 38) there is no such given upon which to rely. Structure or compositional integrity emerges from the body — from paint itself — from the free marks that come from an intuitive working through of the materials with fingers, palms, brushes and rags. Without image to fall back on such thinking is necessarily impulsive. The incentive to begin amounts to a leap of faith — one that reminds us that *painting is an act of devotion*. The first mark made, while deliberately intended is impossible to predict. The immediacy of gesture, its directness is the result of a tension between intentionality and happenstance. The downward smear of *Symptom IV* is a gestural form derived from intention translated to accident or intuition in the operation, in the act of painting. It activates the surface of the work, revealing the material qualities of both pigment and mark; it opens the possibility of form extracted from, but intrinsically still part of, a ground that refuses to submit. These free marks, the catastrophe that corrupts the whole, are brought under control

through the painterly response that determines compositional structure from negative syntax. Such a material response equates to Deleuze's notion of the contour in Bacon's painting — the critical faculty brought to bear on the event of the diagram, on the hysteria of the accident. In this sense painting becomes a process of containment through effacing, cancelling and redacting, tactics that traverse the territory between form and formlessness. Here the figure reaches its limit, disintegrating into gesture and into Rembrandt's shadows, into the shadows of the body — as Deleuze remarks, 'the shadow is the body that has escaped from itself through some localized point in the contour'.⁷⁰

LOST IN TRANSLATION:
FORMS OF DISCOURSE



Figure. 42 *Symptom VIII*, 2014
(oil on stainless steel, 100 x 100 cm)



Figure. 42a *Symptom VIII* — detail 2014

The work is this paradox: as a visible object, it bears witness to an unknown substance, diaphanous, big with powers in innumerable colours, spatialities and temporalities. Slow lightning. The work is in the obligation of that and obliges the eye to turn into a mouth to mouth onto that. The work is the cry it gives when the painter's hand, putting it into our throat, transmogrifies it in passing into visible colour and surveyable expanse, into lasting time.⁷¹

In *Symptom VIII*, 2014 (Figure. 42, 42a) this evolving language of intuition is applied to a larger scale. Where previously I had sought a kind of miserly, impoverished economy of form through subtractive gesture, the larger surface facilitated a more expansive vocabulary of negative forms with which to articulate material working through. The painting process is one that begins with the singular irruptive gesture on a pristine surface — with a definitive statement that descends through extrapolation to misadventure. The integrity of the initial mark, which cannot sustain the compositional whole, is subjected to sabotage — a process of over painting, running through, cutting out and cancelling that continues despite numerous moments of cohesion and coagulation. The painter's impulse to coax form and image to its limit pushes the painting back into chaos, returning the work to its original unstable point of departure. The process begins again, structured upon the salvaged remains from the proceeding pass. All the while the paint cures, resulting in a slower surface, a more fleshy body, which produces material contrast in gestural phrases — from the quicksilver to the labored, from the hard edged to the smeared and smudged. The tension between foreground presence and limitless recession suggests temporal instability — a state of transition or translation that reveals form in a state of becoming or decomposing. At such a threshold resemblance suddenly becomes a possibility, but one that ultimately refuses to be realized. The end point of the process, while far from arbitrary, nevertheless exhibits a certain ambivalence that leaves the viewer with work to do. From a distance the contrast of form against darkness in *Symptom VIII* might imply kinship with, for example, seventeenth century still life painting, but closer inspection reveals the nothing of gesture in place of object. The known collapses into what Bataille termed the 'night' of 'non-knowledge' — the abject state of blindness in which the sublime is *seen*.⁷²

Bataille's writing has been used as a prism through which to view the gestural painting of contemporary artists like Charlene von Heyl. Discussing her work the writer Kirsty Bell describes a painting process characterized by a 'constant doubling-back, wiping over and destroying of what was there before'.⁷³ Bell locates chance at the heart of von Heyl's methods — a *modus operandi* referred to by the artist in terms of sabotage. Von Heyl's painting, Bell

suggests, relies upon chance as a 'productive interference that prevents static, straightforward progression from idea to representation'.⁷⁴ Bell applies Bataille's existential description of chance to von Heyl's production. She quotes Bataille, who states 'Chance represents a way of going beyond when life reaches the outer limits of the possible and gives up. Refusing to pull back, never looking behind, our uninhibited boldness discovers that solutions develop where cautious logic is baffled'.⁷⁵

Bafflement — the surrender of cognition to raw experience or sensation — is, in Von Heyl's work, the result of painting that is somewhat less *malerisch*, less materially expressive than Humphries, but that, nevertheless, offers the prospect of a non-verbal language that communicates a 'whole hearted belief' in painting's ability to 'suggest movement, to conjure depth from two dimensions, to articulate mood, to picture flesh'.⁷⁶ The materiality of paint itself that is center-stage in early works like *Misshit*, 2001 (Figure. 43) is gradually superseded by a more glyphic vocabulary that comes to the fore in later works. Such a vocabulary is presented in a more propositional, strategic manner than in the painting of Humphries. However, quotation and citation are employed sincerely in the service of articulating 'something that remains inexplicable in any other language'.⁷⁷ In a work like *Woman*, 2005 (Figure. 44) von Heyl applies a steady hand to chaos. She states that

What I'm trying to do is to create an image that has the iconic value of a sign but remains ambiguous in its meaning. Something that feels like a representation but isn't. Something that looks as if it has a content or a narrative but hasn't. Something that is kind of hovering in front of the painting instead of just being it.⁷⁸

While the vocabulary of *Woman* might bring to mind historical antecedents — Newman's taped zips, the arbitrary line of Duchamp's *Three Standard Stoppages* (1913) or Pollock's drips and splashes — von Heyl's strategy aims at authenticity rather than pastiche. Her looping, glitching and erasing visual tactics produce 'weird shifts where you don't expect them, and at their best



Figure. 43 Charlene von Heyl, *Misshit*, 2001
(Oil on canvas, 85 x 100")



Figure. 44 Charlene von Heyl, *Woman*, 2005
(Charcoal, oil and acrylic 82 x 78")

Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York

they will have an auratic presence despite themselves. It's not about mystifying anything; it's about lengthening the time of pleasure. Or torture'.⁷⁹

As with Humphries, Newman and a mid-century perspective would appear to be on von Heyl's mind — auratic presence here turns on the sensation of time passing, on an immediacy of *Now* that stretches into the infinite. Von Heyl's painting aggressively goes after such a state, for her it's *Now or Else* — the title of a painting from 2009 (Figure. 45). It is a work that demands seeing as a triggering and as an experiencing. Her emphasis is on something that *feels* like representation, not that looks like it. The response to her painting is physical. She describes this reaction as the 'cringe factor' — an awkward bodily reflex, triggered by a kind of retching eye — an eye in painful spasm confronted with an uncomfortable visual experience of the unknowable. Von Heyl points out that *cringe* is produced by 'procedure and material and imagery, not jokes or literal irony'. Bell aligns this kind of bodily response to a kind of sensuality — with desire that remains unsatisfied. Once again she summons Bataille, quoting his description of sensuality as a shift 'in which suddenly there is this glimpse of a demented 'goo' that, although normally escaping us, suddenly seems attainable. The 'goo' still gets away'.⁸⁰

Now or Else refuses to comfort the eye. Variances in visual rhythm jar against one another. In these later works gestures are distinct and isolated. Hard edges produce a language of abrupt contrast. The needle skips, 'manipulating the speed of perception' as von Heyl remarks.⁸¹ Breadth and depth become conflated. A singular material surface dissolves or corrodes the distinction between figure and ground.

Where Humphries figures the gesture of painting, von Heyl can be said to paint gesture. As such the real in von Heyl's painting turns on a certain fakeness — a fakeness sincerely employed. Both approaches signal a belief in the language of painting as discourse made plastic. Von Heyl quotes Walter Benjamin definition of *image* as 'dialectics at a standstill'.⁸² The provisionality intrinsic to the painting of both artists declares that the discourse is necessarily impossible to resolve. Even if it is at a degree of critical remove,



Figure. 45 Charlene von Heyl, *Now or Else*, 2009
(Acrylic oil linen, 82 x 78")



Figure. 46 Charlene von Heyl, *Igitur*, 2008
(Acrylic on linen 82 x 74") courtesy of the artist and Petzel gallery, New York

impossibility fuels such practices, both in terms of the failure of the word in relation to painting — both painters comment on the limit of written discourse in relation to painting — and in terms of painting itself. *Igitur* is a painting by von Heyl from 2008 (Figure. 46). Of the work, von Heyl remarks

“Igitur” is a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé. He continued to change it for years and left it unfinished. The poem is about the impossibility of making art — and about art as suicide. At the time I was reading Maurice Blanchot, who was obsessed with Mallarmé, and I’m obsessed with people who are obsessed with Mallarmé because they always make for a cool access to pathos. I have tried to get there through Mallarmé himself, but I just can’t enter that mind space.

Pathos coolly delivered is a fair summation of von Heyl’s language of gesture. Existential crisis is presented forcefully but stripped of the hysterics of Mallarmé’s *mind space*. Von Heyl’s *Igitur* expresses the trauma of confronting chaos but does so with an unshaking, deliberate hand. As Lyotard writes, ‘Now the role of the painter comes into full view: to hold up the formidable disorder of the figural to the luminous organization of the scriptural’.⁸³ Von Heyl’s intuitive language produces paintings that refuse to resolve themselves. They remain defiantly open. *Igitur* is the limit of expression — a gaping mouth held at tension. In this sense von Heyl too paints the scream. But it is a silent scream, a muffled scream from a mouth gummed up with Bataille’s *demented goo*.

Like *Igitur*, *Symptom X*, 2014 (Figure. 47) aims at auratic presence squeezed from the gap between the phony and the real, between the gesture of abstraction and abstraction itself — between the disorder of the figural and the security of the scriptural. While the initial point of departure in the process remained a singular movement, a perfectly isolated material gesture hacked from the ground, as the painting developed gesture shifted closer towards a sense of representation, towards something that feels reminiscent — nostalgia abstracted. In this respect *Symptom X* allows the inferred seventeenth century still life forms to stay for longer within the composition.



Figure. 47 *Symptom X*, 2014
(Oil on stainless steel, 100 x 100 cm)



Figure. 48 *Symptom X* — detail

The painting, however, cannot be trusted. The forms remain inconclusive, in a state of transition or translation between the legible and the non-demonstable. As von Heyl comments 'when you get close, you realize that the surface is not keeping that promise; it's almost like a betrayal'.⁸⁴ *Symptom X* (Figure. 48 — detail) reveals itself to be an empty vessel, full to the brim with an abject material language that articulates the fleeting possibility of inner experience. The smear is slipping; it presents bodily evidence of downward movement. It represents the misadventure of the figure. The smear is a portrait of the self; it is a portrait of impossibility and faith — to use Newman's words, 'It is an expression of how I worked. I was a pilgrim as I painted'.⁸⁵

GHOSTS IN THE MACHINE:
PAINTING ABSENCE



Figure. 49 *Negotiation II*, 2013
(Monoprint, oil on newsprint, 14 x 11 cm)

Hands prepare the fire, they flounder in paste and pigment, distribute all but blindly the drops, the clusters, the spots, the fields. And then it's the marvel of the flashing bang, when the great MAN press prints in one go on the thick paper the unforeseen monotype. I paint time, time without dimension, instantaneous and simultaneous. I push the button, the machine begins to smoke its poisonous steam, it presses the paper to the tune of six or eight hundred tons per square inch, expels from its belly the unknown print, new-born of colours, miraculous total bouquet, ready-made rocket, that the paper retains and keeps in its swaddles, I didn't do anything, says the alarmed man faced with the child. What the MAN press can do, the man indeed cannot.⁸⁶

Reflecting upon Sam Francis' works on paper, Lyotard writes 'The monotype fixes the few small articles fallen from a throw of the dice' — an expression he draws from Stéphane Mallarmé's radical poetic work, *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard* (*A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance*).⁸⁷ In *Discourse, Figure* Lyotard cites this work along with *Igitur* in relation to a more phenomenological calibration of language, to a more sensorial capacity within the word. Mallarmé, writes Lyotard, 'radically deprives articulated language of its prosaic function of communication, revealing in it a power that exceeds it: the power to be "seen," and not only read-heard; the power to figure, and not only to signify'.⁸⁸ In this sense language is conceived of as an open form whose obligation is neither to represent nor to re-create, but instead to initiate. Such forms are negative; they are located in the space between letters and words, in the silence, in the void of language

Through the transgression of the usual spacings between textual elements, through an arrangement of words that takes into consideration, beneath the constraints imposed by the structure of language [langue], spatial values borrowed from our visual and gestural experience, whether perceptual or imaginary.⁸⁹

Lyotard writes that 'When speech becomes object, it is not to reproduce something visible, but to make visible an invisible, lost "thing", taking on the form of the imaginary of which it speaks'.⁹⁰ Poles are reversed, from the language of signs to the sign of language — an *other* discourse, plastic and expressive. The spatial values borrowed from visual experience turn on arbitrariness, on the unforeseen distances and proximities, the rhythms of form and formlessness that emanate from the inconclusive or unresolved nature of gesture — from the throw of a dice.

The monoprint is just such a gamble. In symbiosis with my painting during this research I have developed an ongoing cycle of works on paper using the monoprint process, of which *Negotiation II* (Figure. 49) is an example. As the most basic method of transferring a painting to paper monoprinting offered possibilities both in terms of research themes and practice.

The monoprint might be described as the epitome of abjection in painting. The printing press subjects it to a brute force that degrades material and gesture, leaving intention nothing but a stain — an oily slick across paper. In this respect the monoprint process was approached as an evolution of studio research into painting as an abject material language.

The monochromatic ground on an unprimed steel plate is broken up using solvents, oil mediums like honey-gel, rags, bushes and fingers to a tipping point where image is implied but not literalized. The painting is then subjected to the arbitrary and violent process of translation that takes place in the press, corroding painting's present-ness, leaving only vestiges or the fragmented artifact of an experience now absent — the ghost of a painting recorded unfaithfully on paper, a support with intrinsic association with the literary, with drawing and narrative. In the press, painting falls into a gap between the word and visual language, between text and texture. Such a gap elicits the silence experienced before articulation; the gap is the anxious pause before speech, where articulation remains viable but its form indeterminate and improbable. It is an awkward silence, one that asks 'How many combinations were possible, remain pending!' ⁹¹ We are returned to Beckett's notion of a *literature of the un-word*. The spaces between phrases, the voids within language equate to thought made form. Lyotard quotes Paul Valéry who writes of Mallarmé's experimental typography, "It seemed to me that I was looking at the form and pattern [*la figure*] of a thought, placed for the first time in finite space [...] With my own eye I could see silences that had assumed bodily shapes". ⁹²

What the press leaves behind is more akin to a sketch, a preliminary; *Negotiation VIII*, 2013 (Figure. 50) is the idea of a painting, boundless, terrifying, threatening, inconceivable — as Raphael Rubenstein might have it, impossible. *Negotiation VIII* is a 'symptom-picture'; it is the trace of the desire to paint fossilized or cauterized under the press. It presents the material

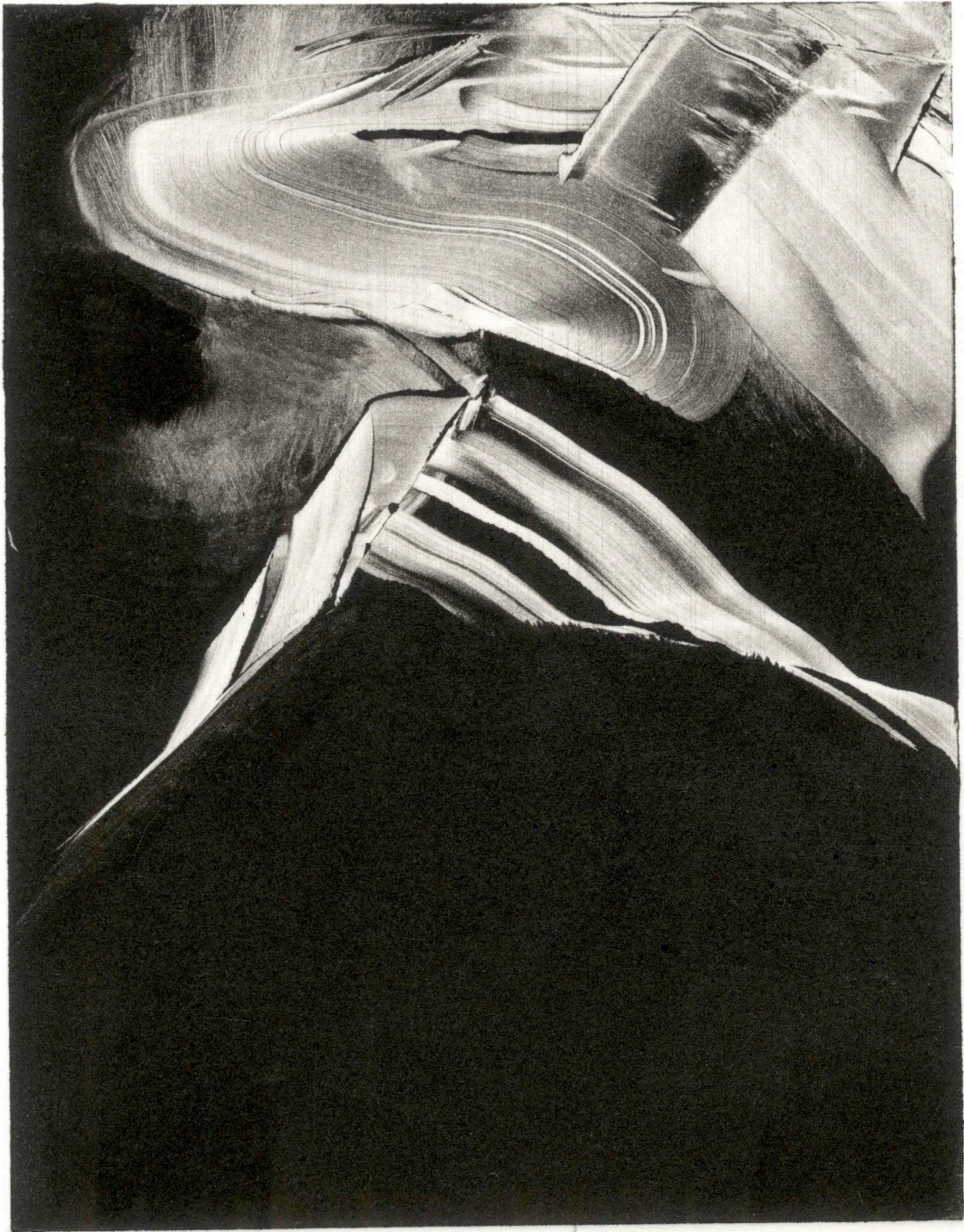


Figure. 50 *Negotiation VIII*, 2012,
(Oil on newsprint, 14 x 11 cm)

evidence of painting. However, the proof turns out to be circumstantial. While the experience remains analog, in the flesh as it were, with all the grain of paper variance and the noise of pigment/ink inconsistency, there is an uncertain temporality to the work. Movement appears arrested but not yet complete; the correlative force of gesture remains operative — the resultant image hums, vibrating between past, present and future tense as it continues to decompose within the eye.

Like rag, brush, blade or finger the press is a painting tool. Its mechanical ambivalence, its industrial frigidity belies potential for expressive material and gestural articulation. In a statement to accompany his 1963/64 *18 Cantos* suite of lithographic prints Barnett Newman described printing as an ‘instrument’ to be played. For Newman lithography was not a ‘poor man’s substitute’, it was not distinct from painting; rather printing methods served the material expansion of the abstract language common to his creative output in general. He comments that ‘I have always worked the stone the same way that I paint and draw — using the area — complete’.⁹³ As an instrument the press is affective and expressive — it is a sensorial device. Of lithography Newman writes, ‘It is like a piano or an orchestra; and as with an instrument, it *interprets*’.⁹⁴ In this sense the press is an intuitive apparatus. The process of interpretation reveals a tension between control and chaos — the forms spat out ultimately unpredictable. The weight of paper, the density of the ground, the pressure of the press itself all contribute to a variable and felt process, a material working through that translates the known, or the visible into the apparition of the invisible, into an expression of the unknowable. The press degrades the work, forcing it beyond expectation, beyond its limit. In this way the press returns the work to darkness. The instant of collision, the gesture of compression, the *flashing bang* that crushes these variables into an unforeseen totality blinds, leaving us to rely on other senses or the sense of the other.

Newman equates such visual forms with a kind of listening. As *cantos* his prints assume the character of poetic or lyrical language — ‘each one different in form, mood, colour, beat, scale, and key’.⁹⁵ In this sense my own print



Figure. 51 *Negotiation X*, 2013
(Oil on 300gm Somerset paper, 14 X 11 cm)

works develop from one another, each form suggesting an alternative threshold for the next. Each constitutes a distinct phrase, but when taken together as a cycle there is the cogency of what Newman describes as ‘symphonic mass’ — each individual expression ‘adds its song to the full chorus’.⁹⁶

Works like *Negotiation X*, 2014 (Figure. 51) come from a ‘grappling with the instrument’, from a material negotiation that leaves the figure/ground relationship in flux — the violence of the press corrupting the two into one another, into the artifact of a singular imprint.⁹⁷ Like Bacon’s splatter of thrown paint or Newman’s coarsely painted taped off zip, the *flash-bang* of the press is the catastrophe that invokes the disorder of the figural against the intelligible, against the figurative. In a literal sense the monoprint process turns painting inside out — the resultant ‘ruined’ image being the reverse of the original. Rolling the press across the painting, chance and chaos are crushed back into the work at the very moment it feels there is nothing more to be done. At the point the painting nears clarity, control is surrendered to the inconsistencies of the machine and the self of the painter is lost. Lyotard describes it poetically as the ‘backward stroke of the wing’ that jolts the ‘storerooms of the visible’.⁹⁸ As such the action of the press is a gesture of sabotage — a term Charlene von Heyl used for the title of a 2008 artist’s book of her print works. John Kelsey describes von Heyl’s works on paper as ‘travel posters for unpicturable, exploded destinations; they are pages of chaos’.⁹⁹ The notion of *exploded destinations* is an apt summation of how the press as gesture, in a work like *Negotiation X*, serves to force open form and insist upon surface. That surface is at tension between speed and stillness, between material manifestation and the immaterial, between the physical presence of ink, oils, paper and mark, and the absence of painting.

Von Heyls’ works on paper are an amalgam of printing techniques. Screen-printing is layered on top of woodcuts on top of drawing on top of digital prints. References and visual sources are gradually buried under a suffocating accumulation of procedure and process. Presented in her book *Sabotage* (2008) von Heyl’s print works offer the proposition of visual form experienced

materially in the place of the written word. Kelsey comments that 'Rejecting both written language and illustration, Sabotage is a sort of image-text that gets straight to one of the book format's most abstract possibilities; the material production of a sort of counterspace that exists beyond meaning'.¹⁰⁰ The excess of her vocabulary ultimately delivers a visual language that equates to a silence that speaks volumes. Von Heyl comments that

The challenge was to use the form of the book and the idea of a text that never surfaces but is there as form, and to use that as a tool to insist on presence [...] I am interested in a kind of iconic statement that, in the moment where you actually try to read it, refuses exactly that and insists on having nothing to say.¹⁰¹

Like Newman's prints works, von Heyl's develop out of one another, moving backwards and forwards towards a coherent whole. Both artists presented such works in a way that emphasized the common vocabulary and purpose of the individual images. While Newman presented his *18 Cantos* as a physical portfolio, complete with introductory statement, von Heyl creates a sense of *symphonic mass* through the format of a book. In so doing both bring the horizontality intrinsic to the written word to the perception of visual form. Both appear interested in the space of text being ceded to *place*, to immediacy — to the *now-ness* of painting. Expanded from their painting vocabularies this language consumes the literary in favor of literal experience. Gesture erases the word. Narrative is obliterated, scribbled out, over written with an all-consuming ground, with abstract form. Without recognizable text, without the sanctuary of the word the reader is forced to become spectator — witness to catastrophe, to the articulation of impossibility.

Movement V, 2014 (Figure. 52) presents the possibility of this impossibility. The smear and the press conspire to leave a corrupted state, neither painting, drawing nor writing. Such catastrophe is transitional — it is motion. Deleuze comments that 'In the unity of the catastrophe and the diagram, man discovers rhythm as matter and material'.¹⁰² In this sense the monoprint alludes to the destabilizing material rhythm of the un-presentable. However,

while the violent methods of the monoprint are given free rein catastrophe does not devour the work entirely, it is confined within the white margins that are an inevitability when printing on paper. This formal intrusion ‘magnetized the challenge’ of printing for Newman. He writes, ‘I would create a totality only to find it change after it was printed — into another totality’. The struggle as he saw it was to ‘give the imprint its necessary scale so that it could have its fullest expression’ — in other words, so that each print declared presence.¹⁰³ Scale in Newman’s lexicon has little to do with size. In an effort to achieve this he subsequently gave each canto unique margins based on intuition. However, from the point of view of my own studio research the machine-driven shift between *totalities* has proved not so unwanted. Such framing equates to Bacon’s contour — the visual means by which the catastrophe of the roll of dice is given compositional value. It serves to contain the ambivalent, invisible forces of abjection, which bring *nothing* and *something* to tension in physical discourse. These margins establish the key in which *rhythm as matter and material* is heard. Whilst proportionally uniform, contour remains variable. Sometimes clean, sometimes bleeding, the margins of the print actuate *another totality*. The gestural phrase that suggests limitlessness becomes, instead, a material statement on the limit of language.



Figure. 52 *Movement V*, 2013,
(Oil on 300gm Somerset paper 11 x 14 cm)

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- ¹ Jean François Lyotard, 'The Whiteness of the Whale' (painting 30), *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington, ed. by Herman Parret, (Venice CA: Lapis Press, 1993), [non-paginated—commentaries follow paintings catalogued 1-43]
- ² Milan Kundra, 'The Painter's Brutal Gesture', *Bacon: Portraits and Self-Portraits*, trans. by Ruth Taylor and Linda Asher, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), p. 12
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009), p. 58
- ⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: Logic of Sensation*, trans. by Daniel W. Smith, (London: Continuum Books, 2003), p. 2
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: Logic of Sensation*, p. 2
- ¹⁰ Ibid, p. 3
- ¹¹ Ibid, p. 4
- ¹² Ibid, p. 109
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Jean François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. by Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon, (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 9
- ¹⁵ Rainer Rumold, 'Painting as Language, Why Not? Carl Einstein in Documents', *October*, Vol. 107, (Winter 2004) p. 86
- ¹⁶ Ibid, p. 77
- ¹⁷ Ibid, p. 90
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: Logic of Sensation*, p. 71
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Ibid, p. 111
- ²³ Jean François Lyotard, 'Untitled, 1990', *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness*, (painting 42)
- ²⁴ Jean François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, p. 8
- ²⁵ Richard Schiff, *Between Sense and De Kooning*, (London: Reaktion, 2011), p. 35
- ²⁶ Richard Kendall, *Drawn to Painting: Leon Kossoff Drawings and Prints after Nicolas Poussin*, (London: Merrell, 2000)
- ²⁷ David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, p. 37
- ²⁸ Ibid, p. 126
- ²⁹ Dawn Ades, *Web of Images, Francis Bacon*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), p. 15
- ³⁰ David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, p. 37
- ³¹ Ibid, p. 14
- ³² Carl Einstein, 'Absolute', *Encyclopedia Acephalica*, ed. by Robert Lebel & Isabelle Waldberg, (London: Atlas Press, 1995), p. 31
- ³³ Carl Einstein, 'Revolution Smashes Through History and Tradition', *October* Vol. 107, trans. Charles W. Haxthausen, (Winter 2004), p. 143
- ³⁴ Ibid.

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- ³⁵ Mark Godfrey, 'Statements of Intent', p. 299
- ³⁶ Ibid, p. 295
- ³⁷ Samuel Beckett, *Proust & Three Dialogues with George Duthuit*, (John Calder Publishers, 1999), p. 101
- ³⁸ Philip Gurrey, 'Interview', *Art World*, Aug/Sept 2008, p. 84
- ³⁹ Philip Gurrey, 'Interviewed by Simon Morris', 2009, published on artists website,
<http://philipgurrey.com/Philip_Gurrey/Philip_Gurrey/Interviews_files/FINAL_GURREYINTERVIEW.doc>
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Joanne Shaw, 'Light and Darkness in Elsheimer, Caravaggio, Rembrandt and Beckett', *Samuel Beckett Today* (Amsterdam: Aujourd'hui, Rodopi, 2012), p. 3
- ⁴² Ibid, p.2
- ⁴³ Ibid, p. 4
- ⁴⁴ Ibid, pp. 5-6
- ⁴⁵ Barnett Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. John P. O'Neill, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), p. 190
- ⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 188
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ George Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-39*, p. 242
- ⁴⁹ Philip Gurrey, 'Interviewed by Simon Morris', p. 11
- ⁵⁰ Carl Einstein, 'Notes of Cubism', *October*, vol. 107 (Winter 2004), p. 166
- ⁵¹ Ibid, p. 163
- ⁵² Ibid.
- ⁵³ Ibid, p. 168
- ⁵⁴ Jean François Lyotard, 'From 'Bonnard or Be Kind to yourself Human Being', Tokyo 2-21-68', (painting 39) *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness*
- ⁵⁵ David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, p. 56
- ⁵⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: Logic of Sensation*, p. 77
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ Cecily Brown, 'Jacqueline Humphries: Artists in Conversation', *Bomb Magazine*, vol. 107, (Spring 2009), accessed online:
<<http://bombmagazine.org/article/3262/jacqueline-humphries>> p. 15
- ⁵⁹ Ibid.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 16
- ⁶¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: Logic of Sensation*, p. 15
- ⁶² Cecily Brown, 'Jacqueline Humphries: Artists in Conversation', p. 17
- ⁶³ Ibid, p. 9
- ⁶⁴ Mark Godfrey, 'Statements of Intent', p. 301
- ⁶⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶⁶ Ibid.
- ⁶⁷ Cecily Brown, 'Jacqueline Humphries: Artists in Conversation', p. 9
- ⁶⁸ Ibid.
- ⁶⁹ Barnett Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 163
- ⁷⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: Logic of Sensation*, p. 12
- ⁷¹ Jean François Lyotard, 'Untitled, 1989' (painting 35), *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness*

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- ⁷² George Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. by Leslie Anne Boldt, (New York: University of New York, 1988), p. 124
- ⁷³ Kirsty Bell, 'Seven Chapters on Charlene Von Heyl', *Charlene von Heyl: Now or Else*, (Bielefeld: Kerber, 2012), p. 9
- ⁷⁴ Ibid.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 9, Kirsty Bell quotes George Bataille from *On Nietzsche*, (Paragon House, 1994), p. 134
- ⁷⁶ Kirsty Bell, 'Seven Chapters on Charlene Von Heyl', *Charlene von Heyl: Now or Else*, p. 7
- ⁷⁷ Ibid.
- ⁷⁸ Shirley Kaneda, 'Charlene von Heyl', *Bomb*, 113 (autumn, 2010), accessed online at <http://bombmagazine.org/article/3655/charline-von-hey1> [non-paginated]
- ⁷⁹ Ibid.
- ⁸⁰ Kirsty Bell, 'Seven Chapters on Charlene Von Heyl', *Charlene von Heyl: Now or Else*, p. 10
- ⁸¹ Shirley Kaneda, 'Charlene von Heyl'
- ⁸² Ibid.
- ⁸³ Jean François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, p. 217
- ⁸⁴ Shirley Kaneda, 'Charlene von Heyl'
- ⁸⁵ Barnett Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 188
- ⁸⁶ Jean François Lyotard, 'Sulfurs, 1979' (painting 23), *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness*,
- ⁸⁷ Jean François Lyotard, 'Untitled, 1984' (painting 24), *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness*,
- ⁸⁸ Jean François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, p. 61
- ⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 64
- ⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 68
- ⁹¹ Jean François Lyotard, 'Untitled, 1984' (painting 24), *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness*,
- ⁹² Jean François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, p. 65
- ⁹³ Barnett Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 183
- ⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 184
- ⁹⁵ Ibid.
- ⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 183
- ⁹⁷ Ibid.
- ⁹⁸ Jean François Lyotard, 'Untitled, 1984' (painting 24), *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness*
- ⁹⁹ John Kelsey, '1000 Words: Charlene von Heyl', *Artforum*, (October, 2008), p. 330
- ¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 331
- ¹⁰¹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰² Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: Logic of Sensation*, p. 74
- ¹⁰³ Barnett Newman, *Selected Writings and Interviews*, p. 183

CONCLUSION

MEMORIES OF THE HUNT: SPECULATION AND REFLECTION



Figure. 53 *The Whiteness of the Whale*, 2015
(Oil on stainless steel, 100 x 100 cm)



Figure. 53a *The Whiteness of the Whale* — detail

For all these reasons, then, any way you look at it, you must needs conclude that the great Leviathan is that one creature in the world which must remain unpainted to the last. True, one portrait may hit the mark much nearer than another, but none can hit it with any considerable degree of exactness. So there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like. And the only mode in which you can derive even a tolerable idea of his living contour, is by going a whaling yourself; but by so doing, you run no small risk of being eternally stove and sunk by him. Wherefore, it seems to me you had best not be too fastidious in your curiosity touching the Leviathan.

Henry Melville, *Moby Dick or, The Whale*¹

Consigning the soaring heaven-bound sublime of the nineteenth century to the velvet, inky depths of a remorseless abyssal vortex that eventually consumes the Pequod and her crew, Melville's invocation of the inexpressible turns on crisis, catastrophe and impossibility — terms which provided the compass points for this research. In relation to practice it was the catastrophe of a studio fire that brought about a fundamental revaluation of my approach to painting and provoked concerns with presence in painting and painting as a downward facing material language. Impossibility gave foundation to the resulting theoretical reflection. Contemporary consensus establishes that, like the white whale, the sublime cannot be captured; it cannot be harpooned and stuck fast with a unified and coherent aesthetic logic. As evidenced in the persistent requests made by the supervisory team for this research to clarify, qualify and contain the terms employed, the frailties of conventional language cannot adequately service the inexpressible or its discourse. The sublime bleeds out. With no respect for boundaries or for territory, it infects. No longer held upright with a spine of Romantic divinity it mutates, becoming a kind of inner experience in the broadest sense, approached in countless ways, by countless writers — a relatively narrow selection deployed here to determine a specific relationship between the sublime and abjection.

Like Ahab's doomed quest, the pursuit of the sublime in painting is destined to fail — *the great Leviathan is that one creature in the world, which must remain*

unpainted to the last. The reconciliation between subject and object, between experience and language remains necessarily out of reach — *there is no earthly way of finding out precisely what the whale really looks like*. However, this research marks a distinction between being destined to fail and failure as destination. Here we have found the ghosts of Bataille and Beckett, Bacon and, more surprisingly, Barnett Newman. Such a destination finds failure as limit, as a kind of materially hard-won non-knowledge — a loaded and contrary *nothing* studiously derived from the intuition and catastrophe inherent in thinking in paint. Such failure is far from empty. Despite being unable to *derive even a tolerable idea of the living contour* of the unrepresentable, such limit experience, nevertheless, opens form. Form is corroded back by the subtractive gesture to an in-between state, to a state of formlessness that testifies to the possibility of the bearing witness to that which is not visible — the boat rocks, then pitches, revealing a fleeting glimpse of the shadow of the Leviathan passing silently beneath in crushing fathoms of darkness. This subjectivity equates to a blindness that forces the spectator to *run the no small risk of being eternally stove and sunk* by the direct experience of painting.

From the outset the project acknowledged the contradictions inherent in sublime discourse. It was consciously embarked upon under what Philip Shaw has called ‘the absurdity of spanning the gulf between the theoretical and the practical’ in relation to the sublime.² Confronted with the failure of the word and a perceived impasse within aesthetic logic, within a straining historical literature policed by external authorities — within the *discourse on the sublime* — studio practice set out to explore gesture and abjection as a material expansion of language to provide direct terms for an experiential account of the concept — to provide terms for the *discourse of the sublime*. The navigation of this distinction, a distinction that marks a distance between verbal and visual language in relation to inner experience, accounts for the central problematic of the project. *Failure is our destination*. The material expansion of language through painterly gesture is ultimately recorded and weighed with the written word and in proximity to the rhetoric it seeks to find distance from. Research that relies upon a written text to qualify an

investigation into *texture*, into the limits of the word in relation to alterity and the pursuit of painting as an autonomous language, has been approached consciously as a flawed proposition, with a view that from this tension terms can be reconsidered, artists re-read and discourse re-invigorated.

Such tension informed the structure of the thesis, whose shape and colour reflects the distinct vocabularies of theory and practice. They have been approached as separate yet symbiotic, provoking a deliberate and necessary shift in tenor between chapters that discuss theoretical and historical context and those that endeavor to articulate the process of painting. Where the former leans towards the established chatter on the sublime, the latter seeks to evaluate studio research through commentary as ‘essay-poem’, to borrow Harman Parret’s description of Lyotard’s reflections on the painting of Sam Francis.³ These reflections on material discourse are speculative rather than conclusive. The heuristic is privileged over the empirical. *Seeing* (as an experiential *blindness* that reveals non-knowledge) is privileged above the sureties of *looking*, of knowing. The pursuit of the *absolute* resolutely refuses to reward with absolutes. It ‘appears to you, struts, parades before your eyes, and then vanishes,’ writes Lyotard on Francis’ painting *Ahab* (1962). ‘And after that, having survived, Ulysses, you’ll be able to write the memories of the hunt’.⁴ In respect to research conclusions, then, some memories of the hunt are more concrete than others.

Discourse of the Sublime: Reflections on Practice

At the foundations of this research lies the figure/ground relationship. In approaching it in relation to the abject, the figure, severed from narrative, is cut adrift on the provisional and the contingent. Figural forces, the (gestural) forces of disruption and sabotage, corrupt the polarities of the relationship, leaving behind a decaying non-state of subjectivity — a kind of absence that alludes to presence. Under the weight of such subjectivity there is perpetual motion of sorts, a constant but erratic back and forth between traces of the familiar and the unknown. The figure/ground relationship is delimited. No longer contained it spills out from the surface of the painting, engulfing the

spectator. In this moment, this *privileged instant*, this *now*, boundaries between the work and the self become indistinct. Experience threatens to overwhelm and the sublime is glimpsed, albeit obliquely, through the murky depths of paint smeared.

While there had been, during the early stages of the project, an expectation that it would be processes of material degradation that would steer studio research — the literal processes of surface corrosion and decomposition — in the end it was the materiality of gesture that provided the compass approaching the abject. Exploring a negative gestural language — an intuitive vocabulary of the unresolved and the erased — enabled the development of a visual language that articulates the territory between representation and abstraction. This territory is inherently unstable; states are permanently in transition, or rather translation. Language shifts from illustration to sensation, from object to subject — from closed to open form.

Crucially, the decision to pursue open form, or formlessness, through the materiality of gesture, and not the gesture of materials, reoriented studio research towards language and its limit, towards a discourse located not within the object, within the brutality of the *informe* surface, but instead within the violence of the *informe* gesture, within expression and subsequently notions of impossibility. In this context painting became a process of sabotage and subtraction — a process of impoverishment as Samuel Beckett might have it. The figure is translated from a mode of representation into that of presentation by figural force — by the palm of a hand that smears one form into another, by the drag of rag that blurs the distinct and the discrete — by the physical, painterly gestures that push a work forward by pulling away what was previously and temporarily achieved.

Such strategies provoked a shift within my painting practice from the abstraction of the figure to the figure of abstraction — to the bodily trace of obligation and limitation, to mark as artifact of the *working through* — a term employed by Lyotard in relation to ‘rhythms of inventive failure [...] Durcharbeiten without end, leaving little monuments to process’.⁵ At the heart

of this working through is a painterly vocabulary driven by intuitive, speculative endeavor. It is gesture that leaves *little monuments* to the search for a material phrase for the un-representable. As this vocabulary of sabotage and subtraction became the central focus of studio research, so the figure, with all its narrative residue, was forced out of my painting in favor of the plastic push and pull through which we witness the corrosion of the distinction between figure and ground. Charlene Von Heyl's words return to mind — 'I want to get abstraction to the point where it screams that it is something: a representation and a thing'.⁶ At such a point we abandon ourselves to the in-between, to the abject.

Thinking in paint equates to *event* — to the '*it happens*' in Lyotard's discussion on the sublime. As such material *working through* can be seen as ontologically driven discourse. It orientates towards sensation, not reason. Lyotard writes, 'This question is called forth by feeling: it is possible for nothing to happen'.⁷ Smeared paint is nothing happening. Gesture translates it from threat to promise, from generality to specificity — to an *absolute nothing*. Subsequently we have seen event defined by a negative vocabulary of gesture. Painting over, through and out has characterized the *Now* of this research. Gesture folds back upon itself destabilizing the familiar. The eye is at once attracted and repelled; the unified self disintegrates. Compositional improvisation and pictorial catastrophe has offered syntax to phrase the unknown. A viable taxonomy, however, remains painfully beyond reach and we are left with only feeling — the feeling that something may be coming, looming towards the surface from bottomless depths of the black monochrome. In this anxiety we embrace, willingly or otherwise, a kind of inner experience.

The smear is not a sign for the sublime, it is not a legible motif, it does not stand in for the vertiginous mountain range or the religious icon, rather it is a symptom — a symptom of, as Beckett remarks, 'Two old maladies that should no doubt be considered separately: the malady of wanting to know what to do and the malady of wanting to be able to do it'.⁸ The smear is symptomatic of haptic vision, of seeing as feeling. Its disruptive movement, which sets the

figure/ground relationship at tension and invokes a destabilizing subjectivity, insists on a collaborative response from the spectator. Commenting on Carl Einstein's conception of visual language in relation to George Braque, Didi-Huberman writes

Einstein speaks to us here of a *vision* which is not a faculty, but exigency, work: it rejects the *visible* (that is to say the already visible) and demands the oscillation of the *visual*; it rejects the action of the *voyeur* and demands that of the *seer*. This is the ultimate mode of comprehending the *symptom-image*: what is a symptom, in effect, if not the unexpected, unfamiliar sign, often intense and always disruptive, which *visually* declares something *which is not yet visible*, something we do not yet know? If the image is a symptom — in the critical rather than the clinical sense of the term —, if the image is discontent in representation, it is in that it indicates a future of representation, a future that we know not yet how to read, nor even describe.' ⁹

In the symptom-image the relationship between work and spectator is no longer passive. Like the symptom, the negative painterly gesture is active, it is open, operative, mobile — it demands. In this respect the symptom-image is a form of discourse, or a contribution to (non) knowledge. The smear, *discontent in representation*, insists that the spectator *go a whaling themselves*.

Discourse on the Sublime: Speculations on Theory

Thinking in paint directly facilitated new critical thinking. Pursuing the abject in painting, via gestural language, offered material expansion of terms in relation to a discourse of alterity. It enabled me to reconsider the narrative of the sublime, subsequently revealing an abject underbelly to a history I discovered to be defined by the cycle of collective trauma. More importantly, the figural evolution of studio research provoked critical reflections that revealed the potential for closer parallels between the existential, anti-hierarchical drive of European dissident surrealist artists and writers and transcendence as articulated by American mid-century abstract expressionist painters. Such possibility enabled speculation on a commonality in language between artists

with diverse and apparently opposing material vocabularies. Though unlikely bedfellows, we have consequently seen, through the cloudy and cracked prism of an abject sublime, unexpected proximity between Francis Bacon and Barnett Newman.

While the diffracted view through such a prism might ultimately remain unreliable, speculation on a relationship between Newman and Bataille offers the possibility of a new perspective on the painter — one that relocates him to the *Other* side of the Atlantic as a dissident surrealist. Though concrete evidence for Bataille's influence on the painter might at this point remain largely circumstantial, clues found in the pages of the sublime issue of *The Tiger's Eye*, in Newman's *Broken Obelisk* sculptures and, in more general terms, the painter's own writing suggest, if not a direct relationship, then certainly more than a passing wave. While the perimeters of this project constrained this particular area of investigation, moving forward there would seem good grounds for an expansion of research into the question of proximity between Newman and Bataille.

We have seen that the modern and postmodern sublime is grasped against the grain leaving us with a downward facing sense of the concept, one that privileges spirit as corporeal experience. 'Level by nature to this earth's horizon are the glances of man's eyes;' comments Ahab, "not shot from the crown of his head".¹⁰ Cut adrift from divine nature or the imperious vertical iconography of the gothic cathedral, the sacred has become fugitive. The 'sacred place' is transitional; a state of becoming found in the opacity of now; it is movement — sensation. It is this bodily sense of the sacred that I have traced from studio practice to Bataillean notions of interiority and the inexpressible prevalent in the twentieth-century and subsequently detectable in the practices of the contemporary painters here discussed.

In so doing conditions have been established to reevaluate the sublime in abject terms. We have seen that the recent re-emergence of concerns with the overwhelming and the inexpressible within cultural production follows a cyclical history whereby the sublime is reanimated in the wake of collective

trauma. From the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 to the terror and turbulence experienced globally post 9/11; a history of anxiety has provoked a gradual shift towards strategies of negation in relation to the inexpressible. Such a shift plunges the sublime into Beckett's existential darkness, where we find the figure in fragment. The optimism that once anchored transcendence to the divine gives way, under the excessive tumult of the contemporary period, to a pessimism that instead binds our sense of the Other to silence, to the impossibility of articulation. At its limit, language is driven toward the visual. Here we find a vocabulary characterized by erasure, sabotage and the provisional. The sublime is reanimated in painting by the expression of painterly endeavor — by an expansion of non-representational gestural form, a kind of *non-composition*, as Mark Godfrey would have it, which deploys formlessness as a phrase of presentation.¹¹ This vocabulary — the disruptive phrasing of the drip, the exaggerated, eviscerating brushstroke, the sprayed and spattered impasto blockage, the scraped back and the smeared — continues to be offered as *future representation*, in spite of, or perhaps because of, past affiliations. As Godfrey suggests issues of authenticity become largely moot; gesture becomes 'unlocatable'.¹² Whatever associations or motivations are found therein, this vocabulary, this syntax of abandon and renewal, is employed sincerely in the service of the unknowable and painting as direct experience.

Painting as material discourse expands to fill the schisms, fissures and contradictions, which for contemporary commentators like Elkins and Forsey prohibit a viable coherent theory of the sublime. As we have seen the critical desire for a unified theory for such a shape shifting, porous concept ultimately cannot be satisfied. However, the language of painting — gesture, colour, mark and matter — offers an alternative discursive model, one better suited to notions of the inexpressible. Lyotard, for whom, to a degree, the terms painting and the sublime are interchangeable, describes the need for the distinction of discursive models when he writes

It appears to me that producing a theoretical discourse on painting — theoretical in the sense that this word has today, that is, a meta-language

whose model is inevitably linguistic (or more strictly language-like) — would be to reconstitute in the region of discourse a set-up that pictorial practice (here the interpretive domain that it is a question of understanding) is precisely in the process of liquidating or liquefying.¹³

Intrinsically orientated towards subject, the language of painting offers the possibility of just such a liquidation through non-cognitive discourse governed by feeling — by the *affect-phrase*, which remains unarticulated despite the presence of gesture. Lyotard continues

Rather than attempting to understand, what we have to do would be to transform the energy at stake in what we call painting, not in a theoretical set-up, but in a type of liquefaction, in a kind of aleatory production, in the sense intended by John Cage; rather than attempting to resolve the question of painting in the sense of arresting its meaning, we would have to dissolve the question, in the sense of undoing the stases, including theory as a 'stasis'.¹⁴

In this respect we can view painting as corrosive agent. The event of gesture, the *Now* of the smear, dissolves the question; it dissolves the stasis of theory. *Aleatory production* — the contingent, provisional and abject energy of painting — corrodes the contradictions and blockages inherent to the concept of the sublime and offers direct terms for the continued expansion of its discourse.

¹ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick or, The Whale*, ed. by Andrew Delbanco and Tom Quirk (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 289

² Philip Shaw, *The Sublime*, (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), p. 123

³ Jean Francois Lyotard, *Sam Francis: Lesson of Darkness*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington, ed. by Herman Parret, (Venice CA: Lapis Press, 1993) p. 20

⁴ Ibid, *Ahab* (no pagination: painting 31)

⁵ Ibid, p. 221

⁶ Mark Godfrey, 'Statements of Intent', *Artforum*, (May 2014), p. 300

⁷ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Differend*, trans. by George Ven Den Abbeele, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 75

⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Proust & Three Dialogues with George Duthuit*, (London, John Calder Publishers, 1999), p. 111

⁹ George Didi-Huberman, 'Picture = Rupture: Visual Experience, Form and Symptom according to Carl Einstein', *Papers of Surrealism*, trans. by C. F. B Miller, Issue 7, (2007), p. 17

¹⁰ Herman Melville, op. cit, p. 544

¹¹ Mark Godfrey, op. cit, p. 298

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Keith Crome & James Williams, *The Lyotard Reader & Guide*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 307

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 105

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